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PAGES 20 BAISAS 200

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INBRIEF

HM RECEIVES
CONGRATULATORY
MESSAGE ON ROP DAY

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, received a congratulatory message from Lt Gen Hasan bin Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, on the occasion of Royal Oman Police Day, which is celebrated on January 5 annually. In the message, Al Shraiqi expressed his best wishes and congratulations to His Majesty on this occasion, coupled with thanks and praise to His Majesty for the great care he accords to the Royal Oman Police, stressing that the ROP is moving forward in the process of development and modernisation to provide security and peace for everyone living in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

KING CHARLES III
‘DEEPLY SADDENED’

LONDON: King Charles III was on Saturday said to be “deeply saddened” after police said a British national, a relative of his sons’ former nanny, had been among the victims of the deadly truck-ramming attack that killed 14 people in New Orleans. Edward Pettifer, 31, who died in the atrocity, was the stepson of Prince William and Prince Harry’s former nanny Tiggy Pettifer. It was “understood the King was... deeply saddened and had been in touch with the family to share personal condolences,” the UK’s Press Association news agency said in a report. Pettifer’s half brother Tom is a godson of heir to the throne Prince William and was a page boy at his wedding to Catherine, the Princess of Wales in 2011. In 1993, Charles employed Tiggy Legge-Bourke, now Pettifer, whose family had longstanding links to the royals, as a nanny for William and Harry after his separation from Princess Diana. “The entire family are devastated at the tragic news of Ed’s death in New Orleans. He was a wonderful son, brother, grandson, nephew and a friend to so many,” Pettifer’s family said in a statement. “We will all miss him terribly. Our thoughts are with the other families who have lost their family members due to this terrible attack,” they added. — AFP

UNEMPLOYMENT
DECLINES TO 3.6%

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) has confirmed a continued decline in Oman’s unemployment rate, which fell to 3.6% by the end of November 2024 compared to 4.3 per cent in October and 4.7% in September. The data indicates that the unemployment rate among males dropped to 1.9 per cent by the end of November compared to 2.3 per cent in the previous month, while the rate for females decreased to 10.3%, down from 12% in October. DETAILS ON P13

Oman miss out fighting to finish runners-up

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
@anuroop_ath

OMAN MISSED out on a third title after losing 2-1 to Bahrain in the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup final in Kuwait City on Saturday night. The match was attended by His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth. Bahrain, after an unimpressive first half, came back strong in the second half. Their strong push for an equaliser found the result in the 78th minute when Mohammed Marhoon converted a penalty kick. Omani midfielder Jameel al Yahmadi tackled Marhoon inside the box prompting Qatari referee Abdulrahman al Jassim to point to the penalty spot. Marhoon made no mistake as his kick went into the left corner as Oman keeper Fayeز al Rushaidi dived to the right. In the 80th minute, Bahrain took the lead when Mohammed Marhoon’s cross to the centre of the box was deflected by Oman captain Mohammed al Musalami for an own-goal. Oman struck the first goal at the Jaber Al Ahmed International Stadium in Ardhiyah, Kuwait City. Young striker Abdul Rahman al Mushaifri headed in from the centre of the box to the bottom right corner of the Bahrain net from



Oman’s Abdulrahman al Mushaifri in action with Bahrain’s Hamad Al Shamsan and Ali Madan. — Reuters

Oman’s first corner, taken by Ali al Busaidy in the 17th minute. In the 12th minute, Bahrain made two good moves. Mahdi al Humaidan’s left-footed shot from very close range went high and wide to the right. In the second move, Mohamed al Romaihi’s header from the left side of the box missed to the right.

In the 15th minute, Oman keeper Fayeز al Rushaidi saved Bahrain’s Mohammed Marhoon’s strong right-footed shot from outside the box after an assist by Mohamed al Romaihi. In the 45th minute, Bahrain’s Ali Madan’s right-footed shot from the right side of the box missed to the left after an assist by Mohamed Marhoon. SEE ALSO P10

Genome Oman, a quality
step to enhance healthcare

MUSCAT: The approval by the Council of Ministers in its meeting chaired by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, to establish the National Genome and Human Data Centre (Genome Oman), constitutes a qualitative step towards enhancing the quality of healthcare in the Sultanate of Oman by boosting the ability to accurately diagnose diseases and develop specialised treatments for patients. This was stated by Professor Dr Khalid bin Hamid al Rasadi, Director of Medical Research Centre, Sultan Qaboos University. He noted that genetic biological samples and genomics are part of the national security content and the programme will set up policies to secure data, regulations and ethical standards for collecting, analysing and using data in a manner that ensures data confidentiality, and the privacy and rights of individuals and the society. The centre will contribute to establishing a national reference database for genomic data, enhancing genomic research and



The genetic biological samples and genomics are part of the national security content. — ONA

national self-sufficiency for local cadres in the field of genomics and bioinformatics; and stimulating knowledge economy in the fields of biotechnology and genomics, he said. Al Rasadi explained that the genetic and genomic database will contribute to

improving health care by developing genetic examination and survey programmes including premarital, prenatal and newborn genomic examinations for rare genetic diseases and also focusing on common diseases such as heart and arterial diseases, diabetes, tumors and lifestyle factors. He noted that this will be an important factor in early detection, prediction and avoidance of genetic diseases and will guide health planning, improve preventive health care and reduce health care costs for genetic diseases. The centre will enrich the research and innovation fields for rare and common genetic diseases such as familial hypercholesterolemia, type 2 diabetes, breast tumors and other diseases; and this will lead to the development of innovative tests and treatments, enable experimental research and clinical trials, and enhance the position of the Sultanate of Oman as a scientific reference in the field of genome research, Al Rasadi concluded. — ONA

MoSD launches national guide to enhance child care

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) has unveiled the ‘National Guide for Child Care in Foster Families’, a pivotal initiative designed to enhance the quality of care for children in foster settings. The guide is aimed at foster families, social and psychological specialists in alternative care, alternative caregivers at the Child Care Centre, Youth Hostels under the Ministry’s supervision and institutions dedicated to child and family welfare. The guide serves as a comprehensive framework with multiple objectives, including:

- Empowering specialists: Building professional capacities for social supervision specialists to provide effective support to foster families.
- Standardising care practices: Establishing unified standards and guidelines to streamline the mechanisms for nurturing foster children and ensuring their holistic care.
- Enhancing resources: Offering a practical reference for specialists to elevate the level of supervision and support for foster families.
- Addressing behavioural challenges: Equipping families with scientifically backed solutions



The guide fosters collaboration between foster families and specialists.

to manage foster children’s behavioural issues. Clarifying rights and responsibilities: Enabling foster families to fully understand their rights, responsibilities and practical solutions to challenges encountered in caregiving. The guide also encompasses key topics such as the Sultanate of Oman’s alternative care system, techniques for interviewing prospective adoptive families, stages of emotional development in children without family care and the psychological impact of trauma on these children.

This initiative is crucial in safeguarding the rights of children deprived of family care and promoting their best interests. It aligns with the stipulations of Oman’s Child Law and Executive Regulations No 125/2019, ensuring that foster parents and specialists are equipped to provide quality care. By enhancing social protection systems, the guide fosters collaboration between foster families and specialists, ultimately improving outcomes for foster children across the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



'Identity Landmarks: Bronze Age Towers in the Omani Peninsula', by Prof Stephanie Dupre

A NEW EDITION IN
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
HERITAGE SERIES

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has unveiled the latest edition in the Omani Archaeological Heritage series, titled 'Identity Landmarks: Bronze Age Towers in the Omani Peninsula'. Written by Professor Stephanie Dupre, this book provides a unique exploration of nearly 100 Bronze Age towers dating back to the third millennium BC, offering new insights into their history, functions, and cultural significance.

The illustrated volume challenges previous beliefs about these structures, often seen as mere watchtowers or defensive fortifications. Through modern archaeological excavations, Dupre reveals that these towers served various purposes throughout ancient times. The book also delves into their construction, development, and repurposing over centuries, highlighting their role in Bronze Age activities, such as long-distance trade, large-scale copper production, and the emergence of monumental architecture. Beyond being a scholarly reference, this work serves as a guide for both visitors and researchers, featuring maps, illustrations, and photographs that document the precise locations of each tower. — ONA

AL MAZYOUNA
EXHIBITION SUPPORTS
PRODUCTIVE
FAMILIES

MUSCAT: The Omani Women's Association in Muscat has inaugurated the 'Al Mazyouna' Exhibition, a four-day event held in the Grand Hall at 'The Village' in Muscat Governorate. The exhibition aims to empower productive families by providing them with a platform to market their products, fostering a spirit of entrepreneurship and initiative among Omani women.

Zainab bint Maqbool Al Balushi, Head of the Entrepreneurship Committee at the Omani Women's Association, highlighted the importance of the event in supporting small and medium enterprises managed by productive families. She emphasized that such initiatives play a vital role in driving economic and social growth while creating opportunities for direct interaction between producers and consumers, thereby opening new avenues for home-based businesses. The exhibition features over 50 participants from diverse sectors, including clothing, abayas, incense, luxury goods, handicrafts, traditional crafts, and local cuisine. This vibrant showcase reflects Omani creativity and strengthens national identity. — ONA

Royal Oman Police marks Police Day today with a special event

KABIR YOUSEF
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) is celebrating its annual Police Day on January 5, with a special event organised under the auspices of Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court. The event will take place at the military parade ground at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences in Nizwa, where a number of newly graduated police officers will be inducted into the force.

To commemorate this significant occasion, the Security Relations and Media Department of the ROP will showcase a unique collection of artwork titled 'National Pride,' highlighting the pivotal role the police force has played in maintaining law and order in Oman. This event reflects the continued commitment of the ROP

to ensuring the safety and security of citizens and expatriates, as well as facilitating essential documentation services for the well-being of the community.

The ROP Day holds a special place in the country's history, with the force being recognised for its professionalism and responsibility in law enforcement. It was first declared on January 5, 1980, by the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, who officially named the force the 'Royal Oman Police' during a ceremony marking the force's establishment in 1970.

The ROP has earned a distinguished position among world police forces due to its discipline and effective law enforcement. Since its inception, the ROP has expanded its scope and now includes various General Directorates that offer vital services to both citizens and residents. These include the



Directorate General of Civil Status, Directorate General for Combating Drugs & Psychotropic Substances, Directorate General of Operations, Directorate General of Customs, Directorate General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigations, Directorate General of Human Resources, and Directorate General of Traffic, among others.

The Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences, along with several directorates, plays a key role in supporting the ROP's mission, with specialised departments in areas such as airport security, financial affairs, logistics, information technology, police aviation and medical services.

Citizens and expatriates alike benefit from the ROP's services, which include civil status card issuance, electronic customs services, online traffic services, vehicle registration renewal and visa application processing, all designed to make services more accessible and efficient.

Since joining Interpol in 1972, the ROP has made significant strides in international cooperation. The force continues to invest in technological advancements such as crime analysis systems, digital forensics, traffic management systems and

online services to improve its efficiency and service delivery. The ROP's state-of-the-art helicopter fleet, used for firefighting, medical emergencies and rescue operations, is just one example of how the force is integrating modern technology to enhance its capabilities.

In 2024, the ROP was awarded the 'Best Institution for Digital User Experience and Beneficiary Satisfaction' and 'Best Digital Government Service Provided to the Business Sector' for its innovative Bayan Application. These accolades demonstrate the ROP's commitment to digital transformation and its ongoing efforts to improve public service delivery.

The Royal Oman Police continues to set new standards in law enforcement, public safety and technological innovation, cementing its role as a leader in Oman's digital and security sectors.

Sayyid Badr welcomes
Russian, Chinese envoys



Sayyid Badr with Oleg Vladimirovich Levin, Ambassador-designate of Russia

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, welcomed Oleg Vladimirovich Levin, Ambassador-designate of the Russian Federation and Liu Jian, Ambassador-designate of the People's Republic of China, as they presented their

credentials. Sayyid Badr extended his warm wishes to the new ambassadors, expressing hope for further strengthening the bilateral ties between Oman and their respective nations. The meetings served as a platform for discussing shared goals and



Sayyid Badr with Liu Jian, Ambassador-designate of China

initiatives aimed at fostering cooperation across various sectors. The presence of senior officials from the Foreign Ministry of Oman highlighted Oman's commitment to nurturing its international relationships and its pivotal role in global diplomacy. — ONA

Thousands join Nizwa Heritage Walk
to celebrate history and culture

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, JAN 4

Over 4,000 enthusiasts gathered in Nizwa for the Nizwa Heritage Walk, an event celebrating the rich cultural and historical heritage of the wilayat. Organised by the Tourism Committee of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, Nizwa Club, Al Somoud Adventure Team, and the Office of the Wali of Nizwa, the walk received strong support from both government entities and private sector organisations.

Commencing at the iconic Nizwa Souq, the walk was flagged off by Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals. The route took participants through a tapestry of Nizwa's most prominent landmarks, including Al Wadi Al Abyad, Daris orchards, Harat Al Suwaiq, and Harat Al Aqur, offering glimpses into the area's storied past.

Highlights of the Heritage Route include Harat Al Suwaiq: Known for its traditional Omani architecture, including mudbrick houses, narrow alleys and fortified gates, participants explored its iconic entrance featuring historic defensive structures and a sentinel tower.

Bait Saleet Fort: This three-story fortress, flanked by watchtowers and adjacent to Falaj Daris, a Unesco World Heritage Site, showcased its

“We are delighted with the participation of 67 walking and adventure teams, women's associations and local community groups. The event unfolded smoothly, with no health incidents reported. We eagerly anticipate hosting the second Nizwa Heritage Walk in November 2025, coinciding with the 55th National Day celebrations.”

KHALFAN BIN HAMAD AL ZAYDI
Chairman of Nizwa Club and head of the organising committee



The walk was flagged off by Minister Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi from the iconic Nizwa.

strategic importance in controlling access to northern Nizwa.

Harat Al Madda: Once a bustling commercial hub, this area featured traditional gates known as Sabah and a glimpse of its historic marketplace.

Falaj Daris Path and Harat Al Aqur: The route led participants through lush greenery, ending at Nizwa Fort. Harat Al Aqur's ancient mudbrick houses, eighth-century mosques and the well-preserved Al Aqur Wall stood as enduring symbols of Nizwa's rich legacy.

Khalfan bin Hamad al Zaydi, Chairman of Nizwa Club and head of the organising committee, expressed his gratitude for the event's success. “We are delighted with the participation of 67 walking

and adventure teams, women's associations and local community groups. The event unfolded smoothly, with no health incidents reported. We eagerly anticipate hosting the second Nizwa Heritage Walk in November 2025, coinciding with the 55th National Day celebrations.”

The walk offered participants a unique blend of sports, tourism and cultural discovery. Stops along the route included rest areas under the shade of Wadi Kalboh's trees, where participants learned about the history of the landmarks. The event emphasised Nizwa's deep-rooted heritage while fostering connections among participants and promoting appreciation for Oman's rich cultural identity.

SHORT TAKES



Dr Said bin Mohammed al Sagri, Minister of Economy, conferred certificates to the graduates

UTAS IBRI HONOURS 624 GRADUATES

IBRI: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Ibri celebrated the achievements of 624 male and female graduates in a grand ceremony. Among the graduates, 286 were men and 338 were women, representing diverse disciplines across the university's three core colleges: 218 from the College of Engineering and Technology, 210 from the College of Economics and Business Administration, and 196 from the College of Computer Science and Information.

Addressing the audience, Dr Nasser al Alawi, Assistant President of the University, emphasised the graduates' readiness to contribute meaningfully to Oman's evolving economic and social landscape. He underlined that the university had equipped them with advanced knowledge and a strong value system to excel in their future careers and challenges.

Dr Al Alawi also reflected on the university's remarkable accomplishments over the past year, highlighting its commitment to academic excellence, innovation and community engagement. These achievements included winning the prestigious Youth Excellence Award for Environmental Initiatives and securing accolades in classical poetry, Arabic calligraphy and journalism at the 'We Are Oman' competition. The university also made its mark in sports, securing first place in the football championship during the 22nd Sports Championship for University Students and earning top honours in several national and international competitions, such as the Nasa Space Applications Hackathon and the Oman Arab Bank competition for emerging businesses.

The university's research output saw significant growth, with 106 scientific papers published in renowned journals this year alone, representing 27 per cent of the branch's total research publications over 17 years. Additionally, 36 funded research projects were initiated, with funding reaching RO 124,752. The ceremony concluded with Dr Said bin Mohammed al Sagri, Minister of Economy (MoE), conferring graduation certificates and honours upon the distinguished students. — ONA

NATIONAL MUSEUM INTRODUCES 'AUDIO GUIDE' SERVICE

MUSCAT: The National Museum has unveiled its innovative 'Audio Guide' service to provide visitors with an enriched and immersive exploration of its exhibition halls and curated collections.

The service, featuring 395 items, is available in both Arabic and English and offers two navigation modes: self-guided and group navigation. Designed with inclusivity in mind, the Audio Guide includes features for visitors with disabilities, such as

audio descriptions for the visually impaired and sign language support for the hearing impaired. It also incorporates user-friendly audio-visual instructions and an interactive map to guide visitors through the museum's exhibits.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION This initiative aligns with the goals of Oman Vision 2040, aiming to foster digital transformation while adding cognitive and cultural depth to visitors' experiences. It

facilitates a deeper understanding of Oman's heritage and encourages meaningful interaction with the exhibits.

In December, the museum also launched a 'Virtual Tour' service on its official website, enabling users to explore its halls and rare collections online, offering a glimpse into Oman's rich historical narrative. This step reinforces the museum's commitment to accessibility, innovation and cultural enrichment. — ONA

Royal Oman Police leads digital transformation

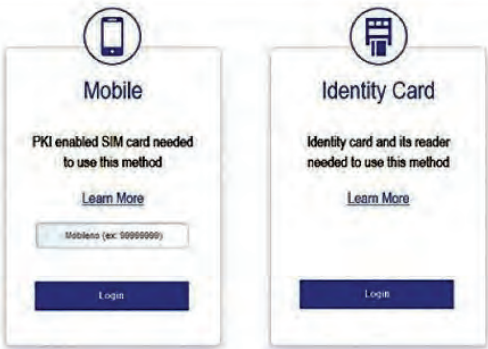
VINOD NAIR @vinot_nair

AS THE ROYAL OMAN POLICE (ROP) celebrates its annual day today, January 5, here are some of the key e-services launched by them as part of the national digital transformation plan for the benefit of both residents and citizens. ROP's services are seamlessly accessible, whether at your fingertips via phone or online.

The services include the Digital ID, when fully launched will allow users to avail of ROP services anywhere, including at airports, by just using their smartphones.

Traffic violations display service displays up to 100 violations at a time, with a note for any excess, in their mobile application. The user will be able to access the image of the traffic violation. It is necessary to update the ROP mobile application to the latest version.

Vehicle registration renewal online service is provided for the private, public sector and Omani nationals and expatriates allowing them to renew the vehicles issued



Digital ID services when fully launched will allow users to avail ROP services anywhere.

by the Royal Oman Police (Vehicle Permit).

Users can pay violations using bank applications, the Thawani wallet and the Tasdeed Company's electronic platform, and reprint the lost Vehicle license via a self-service kiosk.

ROP has established a link with the Ministry of Health and the electronic visa system to validate the medical examination certificates of the expatriate workforce, which will eliminate the need to attach them while applying for a visa before arriving in the Sultanate of Oman.

The mobile application will allow inquiring about and paying for local or Gulf traffic and municipal violations registered with citizens, residents, organisations and companies. The service also allows downloading the violations' report through an advanced search by service category and period and allowing the beneficiary to view e-payment history. Other services include online mortgage addition or removal, a traffic safety institute portal and a direct link with the Supreme Judicial Council to register marriage, among others.

AL HOOTA CAVE SEES SURGE IN VISITORS WITH NEW ATTRACTIONS



AL HAMRA: Al Hoota Cave in Al Hamra, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, has witnessed a significant increase in visitor numbers, surpassing 43,000 in 2024. This surge is attributed to the introduction of two new features: a suspended rope course for adventure enthusiasts and electric carts to facilitate movement inside the cave.

Tour guide Shams bin Abdullah al Hattali highlighted that Al Hoota Cave has two entrances. The first, located in Al Hawiyah village, allows valley waters from mountain peaks to flow into the cave, which spans about 5 kilometres. The second entrance, designed for visitors, offers a walkable stretch of up to 500 metres.

The cave also boasts water lakes exceeding 20 metres in depth, captivating visitors

with breathtaking limestone formations, long-tailed bats, rare spiders and blind fish. On the upper floor of the visitor reception building, a geological museum displays a variety of unique rocks and formations.

Sulaiman bin Salem al Subhi, Geological Exhibition Manager, explained that the museum educates visitors about the region's distinctive geological nature, the cave's formation over millennia and the evolution of rare species like blind fish and spiders. The exhibition also delves into how water shapes natural wonders such as stalagmites and stalactites. Al Hoota Cave, blending natural beauty with rich geological history, is a haven for nature and adventure lovers. Open daily, it remains a must-visit destination in Oman. — ONA

Tour of Oman 2025 to kick off around Al Sawadi Beach on Feb 8

KABEER YOUSUF @kabiyousef

MUSCAT: The 2025 edition of the 'Tour of Oman', one of the world's most sought-after annual professional road bicycle racing, will be held from February 8 to February 12 in and around Al Sawadi Beach Oman.

Organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth in coordination with Oman Cycling Association (OCA) and many government and private entities, 'The Tour of Oman', which has been eagerly looked at by the cycling fraternity across the world since its inception in 2010, will witness world-renowned pedalists vying for the position of the top cyclist.

The five-day sporting event has

been divided into five distinct stages and the Stage 1 men Elite category of the races in Individual Road Race 2 Pro — stages in the ProSeries is scheduled to begin on February 9, 2025 while the Stage 2 of the Men Elite category in Individual Road Race 2 Pro — Stages — ProSeries is expected to be held on February 10.

The Stage 3 men Elite category in the Individual Road Race 2 Pro — stages — ProSeries will be on 10 February, followed by The Stage 4 men Elite category of the races in Individual Road Race 2 Pro — stages in the ProSeries on February 11.

The Stage 5 of the Individual Road Race Men Elite 2 Pro — Stages — ProSeries is scheduled to be held on February 12 and the final result in Men Elite category Individual



The 2025 edition of the 'Tour of Oman', will be held in and around Al Sawadi Beach Oman

Road Race 2 Pro — Stages — ProSeries will follow.

The last edition of the cycling spectacle was held from February

10 to 14 with the participation of 17 teams of seven riders representing well-known teams from Asia, Australia, Europe and the US.

The last 'Tour of Oman' 2024 edition, Adam Yates, a British rider of UAE Team Emirates claimed the overall victory after winning the last loop of the Al Jabal Al Akhdhar Stage after delivering an outstanding performance to overcome Jan Hirt of Soudal Quick-Step by a few seconds. Yates crossed the finish line a few seconds in advance to take the title honours and leader's red jersey.

Adam Yates completed the full tour within 14 hours, 22 minutes and 30 seconds while Jan Hirt of Czech Republic finished as runners up after ending the full tour within 14 hours, 22 minutes and 49 seconds. The New Zealander rider, Finn Lachlan Fox Fisher, ended in third place as he clocked 14 hours, 23 minutes and 9 seconds.



ADDING COLOUR, FUN AND EDUTAINMENT

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabiyousef

THE VERSATILITY, colour and charm that illuminate the skies at Al Qurum Natural Park, Al Naseem Public Park, Al Amerat Public Park, Oman Automobile Association and other venues from December 23, 2024, to today have yet another reason to dazzle throughout the evenings. Nearly 30 artists from ‘Rangrez’, a renowned artist group from the Indian Social Club Oman, are making their presence felt at Al Qurum Natural Park. These 30 highly talented artists showcase an exquisite array of art pieces inspired by colourful Indo-Oman themes, alongside stunning handicrafts that keep the excitement alive. All these displayed artworks are refreshed every week, providing a constant visual delight to visitors from around the globe. As

Muscat Nights 2024 continues, Rangrez’s contributions stand out as a testament to cultural exchange and artistic brilliance. “We, the artists of Rangrez, are extremely grateful to the Muscat Nights authorities, Muscat Municipality and Indian Social Club for supporting us to reach out to the public through our medium of communication, that is ‘art’. We are thankful to Babu Rajendran, the chairman of the ISC, whose efforts helped us get three stalls upon Rangrez to showcase our members’ works for the entirety of the festival, bolstering their enthusiasm and dedication,” said Shalini Karthik, one of the artists participating in the three pavilions inside the Global Village.

A highlight of Rangrez’s participation is their interactive stall, which has successfully attracted large crowds, particularly children and young adults. This engaging space offers a variety of

art-related activities aimed at fostering a love for creativity among visitors. Moreover, free art workshops such as knife painting, bottle art, printing on tote bags and canvas painting are being scheduled over the weekends at the Rangrez booth, further enhancing the festival’s artistic offerings.

The response to Rangrez’s exhibits has been overwhelmingly positive, with visitors praising the art and handicrafts on display. Known for their successful event executions, Rangrez has once again proven their excellence with this event.

“Muscat Nights 2024 holds special significance as it beautifully bridges the cultures of India and Oman, receiving widespread appreciation from both Omani nationals and residents,” they said. Since the beginning of Muscat Nights, workshops such as The Craft Alcove, Knife Strokes (creating vibrant Darwish art with palette knife magic)

The response to Rangrez’s exhibits has been overwhelmingly positive, with visitors praising the art and handicrafts on display

and Painted Threads (turning fabric into fashion with visitors’ own painted designs) have been conducted. On January 2, a training session on Clay and Canvas Fusion (exploring the unique fusion of clay and canvas) and on January 3, ‘Wooden Wonders’, a workshop that helps craft beautiful paintings on wood for lasting art, were held. On January 4, Tote of Tradition (decorate your tote bag with intricate Indian block prints) was also organised.

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS INCLUDE:
JANUARY 9: Patterned Canvas (bring vibrant designs to life on canvas with stencils)
JANUARY 10: Magnetic Creations (design unique and colourful magnets to brighten your fridge)
JANUARY 11: Card Canvases (express your creativity with spray-painted greeting cards)

SHORT TAKES

DATES, HONEY EXPO HELD IN WADI AL MAAWIL

WADI AL MAAWIL: A vibrant Dates, Honey, Dairy and Handicrafts Exhibition was inaugurated in the Wilayat of Wadi Al Maawil, showcasing local agricultural, animal and household products. The exhibition, featuring 30 families and companies, highlights rural women’s products, honey-based goods, crafts, and consumer items. It aims to bolster income for productive families and support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the wilayat. This initiative underscores the governorate’s commitment to promoting local businesses and sustaining traditional industries, further enhancing community livelihoods. — ONA

WORK ON OBG, OCC TO BE OVER THIS YEAR

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Several tourism and infrastructure projects will be completed this year, as revealed in Budget 2025. The construction of the Oman Botanic Garden (OBG) will be completed this year, alongside the development of Hwayat Najm (Bimmah Sinkhole) and the waterfront in the Wilayat of Al Ashkharah. In the field of culture, sports and youth, the Oman Cultural Complex (OCC) building will be completed, sports clubs and complexes will be rehabilitated, and the Sultanate of Oman will participate in Expo Osaka 2025. The first phase of Sultan Haitham City will be completed, housing assistance will be provided to 1,200 eligible cases, and construction of housing units in areas affected by climate conditions will be completed. Major road projects expected to be completed this year include the Khasab-Daba-Lima Road, Al Sharqiyah Expressway, Adam-Thumrait Road, and Ansab-Jafnain dualisation project. Additionally, the expansion of the Muscat Expressway will begin this year.

Al Batinah South Municipal Council focuses on innovation

Al RUSTAQ: The Municipal Council of Al Batinah South Governorate convened its 10th regular meeting of 2024, chaired by Eng Masoud bin Said al Hashmi, Governor of Al Batinah South. The Council reviewed key topics, including preparations for the second edition of the ‘Try South Al Batinah’ Festival and advancements in scientific innovations, projects and student achievements within the governorate. Discussions included responses from various authorities regarding infrastructure projects. These included raising speed limits on the road from Al Marighah Roundabout to Nakhal Roundabout, constructing a protective barrier for Al Silah Bridge in the Wilayat of Barka, and re-paving the road from Nakhal Market to the Sarir area. Additional topics addressed included the 24-hour operation of Al Abyad Health Centre, plans for a protective dam to safeguard villages in the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, and the development of a residential plan for the Niyabat of Al Hawqain. — ONA

UTAS hosts workshop to support digital transformation

MUSCAT: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences organised a workshop titled ‘Service Inventory, Description, and Documentation’ as part of its efforts to enhance the efficiency and quality of services provided and support the goals of digital transformation. The workshop aimed to prepare the university for

the launch of the National Unified Portal for Government Services by January, focusing on fostering collaboration between departments and entities to ensure precise and effective implementation. Rashed bin Saif al Siyabi, Head of the Entrepreneurship Department, said, “The richness of this workshop lies in the purposeful and in-depth

discussions among all participants involved in digital transformation programmes. The expertise and knowledge of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology were valuable and insightful. Their experience and advice were key to a better understanding of the concepts of process reengineering and simplification.” Dr Noor bint Abdullah al Sharfariyah, Assistant Head of the Centre for Training and Career Guidance, emphasised that the university

is committed to enhancing transparency and providing clear references for stakeholders through achieving integration among all departments and adopting best practices for documenting and classifying services. Munir bin Mohammed Sawakhroon, Head of the Coordination and Follow-Up Department at the university’s Salalah branch, highlighted the workshop’s role in improving the university’s operations and enhancing the quality of services offered to beneficiaries.

12 artists shine in OSFA ornamentation art

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE, Sports and Youth, in collaboration with the Directorate-General of Arts and the Omani Society for Fine Arts (OSFA), proudly inaugurated the ‘Ornament of Oman’ (Zukhrufat Oman) exhibition, a magnificent celebration of Islamic ornamentation art.

This landmark event, hosted at the Omani Society for Fine Arts, was launched under the esteemed auspices of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture. The opening ceremony drew a vibrant gathering of art aficionados, cultural advocates, and members of the local community, all united by their appreciation for Oman’s rich artistic legacy.

The exhibition is the crowning achievement of the ‘Ijtiyaz’ Programme, an innovative cultural and artistic initiative aimed at fostering talent, preserving heritage, and advancing the intricate skills associated with Islamic ornamentation.

The programme, organised by the OSFA, is a testament to the ministry’s commitment to nurturing traditional art forms and empowering local artists. Over a year, 12 Omani female artists participated in the programme under the expert mentorship of the renowned artist Anwar bint Khalifa bin Rabeea al Hassaniyah.

These talented women delved deeply into the aesthetic and technical aspects of Islamic ornamentation, honing their skills through a meticulously designed curriculum that balanced theoretical knowledge with hands-on practice. The training included



Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy inspecting Islamic ornamentation art

The exhibition is the crowning achievement of the ‘Ijtiyaz’ Programme, an innovative cultural and artistic initiative aimed at fostering talent, preserving heritage, and advancing the intricate skills associated with Islamic ornamentation.



The exhibition nurtures traditional art forms and empowers local artists.

theoretical lectures exploring the cultural significance and historical evolution of Islamic ornamentation, practical workshops focused on mastering various techniques and artistic styles, and research presentations on traditional materials and their application in ornamentation.

A particular emphasis was placed on integrating ornamentation art with Arabic calligraphy, further enriching the creative possibilities within this discipline. At the heart

of the programme’s success lies the artists’ ability to translate their learning into stunning creations. The exhibition showcases 60 remarkable works, each a labour of love and a reflection of the artists’ creativity and dedication.

From intricate floral and geometric patterns to classic gilding designs, the pieces exemplify the enduring beauty and relevance of Islamic ornamentation in contemporary art. The ‘Ornament of Oman’ exhibition served as a platform for cultural exchange, fostering dialogue between artists and the broader community. It underscores the vital role of Islamic ornamentation in shaping Omani cultural identity and highlights the importance of preserving and reviving this art form for future generations. This celebration of artistic innovation and heritage marks not only the successful conclusion of the first season of the ‘Ijtiyaz’ Programme but also a renewed commitment to the development and promotion of Omani arts on a national and international stage.

Vocational education shaping Oman’s future workforce

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

Vocational and technical education in Oman is shaping the aspirations of students by aligning education with labour market demands, enhancing practical and professional skills, and contributing to the realisation of ‘Oman Vision’ 2040. This initiative not only equips students with the tools for a successful career but also ensures that national competencies meet the needs of a dynamic and evolving workforce.

The implementation of vocational and technical education opens new horizons for students, enabling them to pursue specialised technical training with efficiency and confidence. These programmes ensure that students are well-prepared for higher education or immediate entry into various industries, creating a pool of high-quality national talent

to address current and future labour market needs.

Dr Atom bint Mohammed Al Khatiri, Assistant Director, Department of Humanities Curriculum Development for Foreign Languages and Head of the Vocational and Technical Education Implementation Team for the BTEC Programme, emphasised the Ministry’s commitment to aligning school education with global trends. “This initiative helps students prepare for a future career path rooted in skills while meeting the labour market’s demands,” she stated.

This two-year programme for post-basic education focuses on developing knowledge and practical skills in professional and technical fields, tailored to students’ interests and aspirations. The curriculum includes basic, optional, and specialised subjects, with international accreditation ensuring professional skill development.



The implementation of vocational and technical education has opened up new horizons for students

The British Pearson Foundation’s BTEC programme has been introduced in four government schools in Muscat and North Al Batinah Governorates. Specialisations include Business Administration and Information Technology, taught in English, and Engineering and Industry, delivered in Arabic for male students. This

interactive curriculum blends theoretical learning with hands-on application, fostering skills such as project management, business operations, marketing strategies, programming, and cybersecurity — key competencies in the digital age.

Initial evaluations reveal strong acceptance among students and the local community, with noticeable improvements in academic performance and practical skills.

Ali bin Suleiman Al Amri, a 11th grade student at Hafs bin Rashid School for Basic Education for Boys, remarked, “Vocational and technical education equips us with practical skills that benefit our lives. It allows us to explore fields like engineering or technology, enhancing job prospects and enabling financial independence.”

Similarly, Lujain bint Ali Al Ghafilayi, a 12th grade student at Halima Al Saadiya Basic Education School, shared her enthusiasm:

“Our school encourages us to pursue vocational education by offering a supportive environment. I hope for more intensive English training from the tenth grade to excel in professional subjects.”

Educators and specialists emphasise the importance of implementing the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, which advocate for vocational and technical education. This system empowers 11th and 12th-grade students to explore fields such as engineering and industrial specialisations, equipping them with critical skills to contribute to Oman’s growth.

By fostering a generation of skilled professionals, vocational and technical education serves as a cornerstone in building a sustainable and competitive workforce, ultimately driving the nation closer to achieving ‘Oman Vision’ 2040.

WORLD

SHORT TAKES



A serviceman carries a shell as he fires towards Russian troops, in Kharkiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

RUSSIA TO RESPONSE AFTER MISSILES TARGETED BELGOROD

MOSCOW: Russia vowed on Saturday to retaliate after it accused Ukraine of firing US-supplied ATACMS missiles at the border region of Belgorod the previous day. Outgoing US President Joe Biden authorised Kyiv to use the long-range weapons against Russia last year, in a move the Kremlin denounced as a grave escalation of the nearly three-year conflict.

“On January 3, an attempt was made from Ukrainian territory to launch a missile strike against the Belgorod region using US-made ATACMS operational-tactical missiles,” the Russian defence ministry said. “These actions by the Kyiv regime, which is supported by Western curators, will be met with retaliation,” it added, saying all the missiles were shot down. The ministry said earlier that air defences downed eight ATACMS missiles in total, without saying when or where.

US president-elect Donald Trump said in an interview last month he was “very vehemently” opposed to Ukraine using the arms, which he said were “escalating” the conflict. — AFP



Syrians gather raising the country's flag, in Umayyad Square, in Damascus. — Reuters

SYRIA TO RESUME INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS ON TUESDAY

DAMASCUS: Syria said on Saturday the country’s main airport in Damascus would resume international flights starting next week after such commercial trips were halted following last month’s ousting of president Bashar al-Assad. “We announce we will start receiving international flights to and from Damascus International Airport from” on Tuesday, state news agency SANA said, quoting Ashhad al-Salibi, who heads the General Authority of Civil Aviation and Air Transport. “We reassure Arab and international airlines that we have begun the phase of rehabilitating the Aleppo and Damascus airports with our partners’ help so that they can welcome flights from all over the world,” he said. International aid planes and foreign diplomatic delegations have already been landing in Syria. Domestic flights have also resumed. Syrian Airlines will resume flights from Damascus to Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, starting on Tuesday, an employee said. On Thursday, Qatar Airways announced it would resume flights to the Syrian capital after nearly 13 years, starting with three weekly flights from Tuesday. — AFP

EVACUATION ORDERS

Series of earthquakes rattle Ethiopia



Evacuations were underway in Ethiopia after a series of earthquakes, the strongest of which was a 5.8 magnitude jolt, rocked the remote north. The quakes were centred on the largely rural Afar, Oromia and Amhara regions after months of intense seismic activity. Ethiopia’s government Communication Service said around 80,000 people were living in the affected regions and the most vulnerable were being moved to temporary shelters. — AFP

SCHOLZ SLAMS ‘ERRATIC’ MUSK COMMENTS, SUPPORT FOR AFD

BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz condemned Elon Musk’s “erratic” comments and his open support for the extreme-right AfD party in an interview published on Saturday. The world’s wealthiest man has in a string of posts attacked several European leaders and ruffled feathers on the continent.

Asked about interference by Musk -- who last month called Scholz an “incompetent fool” before calling the German president an “anti-democratic tyrant”, the

chancellor told Stern magazine it was important “to keep calm” ahead of Germany’s snap elections on February 23.

“In Germany, everything is proceeding according to the wishes of our citizens and not the erratic comments of an American billionaire,” he told the magazine in an interview. “The German president is not an anti-democratic tyrant and Germany is a strong and stable democracy -- never mind what Mr Musk says.” Scholz said

public support from the ever-more-powerful Musk for the far-right AfD was “much more problematic than these insults”.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is polling in second place behind the conservatives, “advocates closer links with Putin’s Russia and wants to weaken trans-Atlantic ties”, Scholz said. The extreme-right party acknowledged this week it was in regular contact with the entourage of South African-born Musk. — AFP

Seoul investigators ask to clear way for Yoon’s arrest

SOUTH KOREAN investigators again asked the country’s acting president on Saturday to order the presidential security service to comply with an arrest warrant for impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol. The security service, along with military troops, on Friday prevented prosecutors from arresting Yoon Suk Yeol in a six-hour standoff inside Yoon’s compound. The investigators secured the warrant to arrest Yoon over his brief declaration of martial law last month. The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which is investigating the case, said on Saturday it had again asked acting President Choi Sang-mok, the nation’s finance minister, to order the presidential security service to cooperate with the warrant. A finance ministry spokesperson declined to comment. The police asked the chief of the presidential security service, of Park Chong-jun, to appear for questioning on Tuesday, Yonhap News reported. Yoon’s Dec. 3 martial declaration stunned South Korea and led to the first arrest warrant to be issued for a sitting president.

Thousands of rival South Korean protesters rallied in the capital on Saturday, after a failed attempt to arrest suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol for imposing a short-lived martial law decree that led to his impeachment. The country has been plunged into political chaos since last month, with Yoon defiantly holed up in the presidential residence, surrounded by hundreds of loyal security



People gather for a rally to protest against impeached South Korea's president Yoon Suk Yeol in front of the Gwanghwamun Gate in Seoul. — AFP

“The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which is investigating the case, said on Saturday it had again asked acting President Choi Sang-mok, the nation’s finance minister, to order the presidential security service to cooperate with the warrant.

officers who have so far resisted efforts by prosecutors to arrest him. Thousands of protesters, both for and against Yoon, gathered in front of the residence and along major roads in Seoul on Saturday -- either demanding his arrest or calling for his impeachment to be declared invalid.

Members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, South Korea’s largest umbrella union, attempted to march to Yoon’s residence to protest against him, but were blocked by police. It said two of its members were arrested, and several others were injured in clashes. Yoon faces criminal charges of insurrection, one of a few crimes not subject to presidential immunity, meaning he could be sentenced to prison or, at worst, the death penalty. If the warrant is

executed, Yoon would become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested. In scenes of high drama on Friday, Yoon’s guards and military troops shielded him from investigators who eventually called off the arrest attempt citing safety concerns. The showdown -- which reportedly included shoving but no shots fired -- left the warrant in limbo, with the court order set to expire on Monday. CIO officials could make another bid to arrest him before then. But if the warrant lapses, they may apply for another.

The Constitutional Court slated January 14 for the start of Yoon’s impeachment trial, which if he does not attend would continue in his absence. Former presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Park Geun-hye never appeared for their impeachment trials. — Agencies

ISRAELI STRIKES KILL DOZENS IN GAZA

GAZA: An Israeli military strike killed 12 people in a house in Gaza City early on Saturday, bringing the death toll from strikes across Gaza to 62 over the last day, Palestinian medics said, as mediators launched a new ceasefire push in Qatar. Residents and medics said at least 14 people had been in the house of the Al-Ghoul family when the strike took place in the early hours, destroying the building.

People scoured the rubble for possible survivors trapped under the debris and medics said several children were among those killed. A surge in Israeli operations and the number of Palestinians killed in recent days comes amid a renewed push to reach a ceasefire in the 15-month-old war. — Reuters

FATAL FLAMES

China market blaze kills eight, 15 hurt



A fire at a vegetable market in China’s northern province of Hebei killed eight people and wounded 15. Authorities were investigating the cause of the fire in the city of Zhangjiakou, which was doused just over an hour after it broke out at about 8:40 am. Huge dark billows of smoke hung over the market in the city’s Qiaoxi district, videos posted by other media showed, along with large flames. — Reuters

PRESIDENCY CONFLICT

Venezuelan oppn candidate seeks support



Venezuelan opposition candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia was set to meet Argentine President Javier Milei on a regional tour to drum up support ahead of President Nicolas Maduro’s swearing-in for a third term. The 75-year-old fled to Spain in September after being threatened with arrest by the government but has pledged to return to his country to be sworn in as president on January 10, when Maduro is due to be inaugurated. — AFP

The New York Times

Judge upholds Trump’s conviction but signals no jail time



BEN PROLESS

The author is an investigative reporter at The New York Times



KATE CHRISTOBEK

The author is a reporter covering the civil and criminal cases against former president Donald J. Trump

A New York judge upheld president-elect Donald Trump’s felony conviction but signalled that he was inclined to spare him any punishment, a striking development in a case that had spotlighted an array of criminal acts and imperilled the former and future president’s freedom. The judge, Juan M. Merchan, indicated that he favoured a so-called unconditional discharge of Trump’s sentence, a rare and lenient alternative to jail or probation. He set a sentencing date of January 10, and ordered Trump to appear either in person or virtually.

An unconditional discharge would cement Trump’s status as a felon just weeks before his inauguration — he would be the first to carry that dubious designation into the presidency — even as it would water down the consequences for his crimes. Unlike a conditional discharge, which allows defendants to walk free if they meet certain requirements, such as maintaining employment or paying restitution, an unconditional discharge would come without strings attached. That sentence, Merchan wrote in an 18-page decision, “appears to be the most viable solution to ensure finality and allow defendant to pursue his appellate options.”

Trump, who could ask an appeals court to intervene and postpone the sentencing, was facing up to four years in prison. A Manhattan jury convicted him in May on

34 counts of falsifying business records, concluding that he had sought to cover up a scandal that threatened to derail his 2016 campaign for president. Merchan declined on Friday to overturn the jury’s verdict, rebuffing Trump’s claim that his election victory should nullify his conviction. And last month, the same judge rejected another argument Trump had mounted in hopes of getting the case dismissed: that his conviction had violated a recent Supreme Court ruling granting presidents broad immunity for their official actions.

Together, Merchan’s two rulings picked apart Trump’s legal manoeuvres, upholding the first criminal conviction of a US president and denying him the opportunity to clear his record before returning to the White House. “To dismiss the indictment and set aside the jury verdict would not serve the concerns set forth by the Supreme Court in its handful of cases addressing presidential immunity nor would it serve the rule of law,” Merchan wrote in Friday’s ruling. “On the contrary, such a decision would undermine the rule of law in immeasurable ways.”

The judge added that “the sanctity of a jury verdict” was “a bedrock principle in our nation’s jurisprudence.”

The judge’s ruling does not guarantee that Trump will face sentencing January 10 as planned. In the coming days, his lawyers could ask an appeals court to grant an

The judge, Juan M. Merchan, indicated that he favoured a so-called unconditional discharge of Trump’s sentence, a rare and lenient alternative to jail or probation. He set a sentencing date of January 10, and ordered Trump to appear either in person or virtually

emergency pause of the sentencing. The appeals court could then rule within a matter of hours. Alternatively, the president-elect could decide not to fight the sentencing now that he knows the judge is unlikely to send him to jail.

Although New York appeals courts might resist his efforts, he may ultimately fare better at the Supreme Court, where the 6-3 conservative majority includes three justices whom Trump appointed in his first term.

In a statement on Friday, a spokesperson for Trump did not say whether the president-elect would seek to pause the proceedings, although he suggested that the sentencing could become a distraction. “President Trump must be allowed to continue the presidential transition process and to execute the vital duties of the presidency, unobstructed by the remains of this or any remnants of the witch hunts,” the spokesperson, Steven Cheung, said in the statement.

“There should be no sentencing, and president Trump will continue fighting against these hoaxes until they are all dead.”

A spokesperson for the Manhattan district attorney’s office, which prosecuted Trump, declined to comment. If the sentencing proceeds as planned, an unconditional discharge would mark a highly unusual conclusion to the landmark case.

NEW ORLEANS RELEASES MOST NAMES OF VICTIMS



ISABELLE TAFT

The author is a reporter for The New York Times covering national news

Things had been looking up for Elliot Wilkinson, a 40-year-old man who was among the 14 people killed in New Orleans this week in what federal authorities were investigating as a terrorist attack.

Wilkinson had been released from prison and was homeless, but he had started searching for an apartment, according to a local homeless

outreach group, Unity of Greater New Orleans. And he was back in one of his favourite places, according to his brother, Cecil. “That’s where he wanted to go, when he got out, so that’s where he went,” the brother said. “He loved that city.” In the early hours of New Year’s Day, a Texas man drove a pickup into the city’s French Quarter, where crowds of people had gathered along Bourbon Street to celebrate. Fourteen people were killed, and dozens more injured, including two police officers hurt during a shootout that killed the driver. Bourbon Street’s live music and crowds draw a lively but diverse mix of people, including tourists, buskers and homeless people down on their luck. On a holiday night, it drew a youthful crowd. Many of the victims were in their teens and 20s.

On Friday evening, the city released the names of 12 of the 14 victims. All had died of blunt force injuries, according to the emailed release. The name of a British citizen had been withheld at the request of the family. Another person had not yet been identified. As their names were revealed, friends and families mourned the promising futures cut short. Some had just started college or new jobs. On Friday, people gathered near flowers and candles arranged along the path that the truck had taken. President Joe Biden was planning to visit on Monday and meet with the victims’ families and others affected.

Among the victims was Drew Dauphin, 26, who had come to the city from Alabama with his little brother, Matthew. They had gotten separated after going to a concert and getting some pizza. Hubert Gauthreaux, 21, had planned to watch the fireworks along the river, he told his family. That morning, they checked his phone’s location, and saw it had moved to Bourbon Street.

Matthew Tenedorio, 25, had gone out with friends after eating dinner with his parents. He was remembered for his childhood high jinks with his cousins, playing pranks and fighting with Nerf guns. Kareem Badawi and Ni’Kyra Cheyenne Dedeaux were 18. Badawi had recently finished his first semester at the University of Alabama, where he majored in mechanical engineering.

Johnson reelected as speaker after revolt

SPEAKER

Mike Johnson won reelection to the top post in the House, salvaging his job in a dramatic last-minute turnabout by putting down a revolt from conservatives who initially voted to block his ascent. Johnson barely mustered the majority he needed to win reelection on the first ballot, with help from President-elect Donald Trump, who interrupted a golf game to lobby holdouts by phone. That allowed the speaker to avoid the humiliation of a multiday slog of failed votes like the one his predecessor Kevin McCarthy suffered through before ultraconservatives relented and elected him two years ago. Johnson won with just enough votes to clinch the gavel, 218-215.

But the chaotic scene that played out on the House floor — with three Republicans initially opposing Johnson and six more abstaining until it appeared he would lose before voting for him — reflected the same divisions within GOP ranks that had plagued McCarthy. It was a grim portent for Johnson at the start of the new all-Republican Congress, and for Trump as he embarks upon his second term with an ambitious and crowded agenda that will require his party to stay almost entirely unified.

Johnson and Trump had urged Republican lawmakers to quickly elect him speaker so the House could start work on the president-elect’s legislative priorities. But it became clear early into the vote on Friday that some of the hardliners who had vented dissatisfaction with Johnson’s performance in the top post were intent on dealing him an embarrassing rebuke before allowing him to keep his job. As their names were called by the House clerk, instead of voting, they stared defiantly ahead and remained silent.

By the time three other Republicans — Reps. Thomas Massie of Kentucky, Keith Self of Texas and Ralph Norman of South Carolina — voted for lawmakers other than



Members of the House gather at the opening of the 119th Congress on the House floor at the Capitol in Washington.



CATIE EDMONDSON

The writer is a congressional correspondent for The New York Times

The chaotic scene that played out on the House floor — with three Republicans initially opposing Johnson and six more abstaining until it appeared he would lose before voting for him — reflected the same divisions within GOP ranks that had plagued McCarthy.

Johnson, it appeared that he was at risk of losing the gavel to Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York, the Democratic leader. But eventually, the six lawmakers who had initially withheld their votes changed them to support Johnson, R-La. With three defectors, he was still short of the majority necessary to win reelection.

Johnson then huddled with two of the holdouts — first in the centre aisle of the House floor, and then in an adjacent room — as the vote was held open for nearly an hour. They returned together to the floor, and Self and Norman strode to the centre of the chamber and changed their votes with Johnson looking on, handing him the support necessary to win another term, as Republicans stood and applauded. Self said in an interview that he changed his vote after Johnson agreed to include more members of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus in negotiations over the massive budget and tax bill that Republicans plan to pass later this year through a fast-track process to avoid a Senate filibuster.

Self and Norman were also pressed by Trump in a phone call coordinated by Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina, who alerted the president-elect when it appeared there were too many defectors to allow Johnson to prevail. She

pulled Johnson and the two other lawmakers into a private room and put Trump, who was in the middle of a golf game, on speakerphone. Norman added that Trump continued to lobby them, saying: “We’ve got the most opportunity we’ve ever had — House, Senate, the trifecta. You don’t get that opportunity.”

Among the demands were that House Republicans “not increase federal borrowing” — as Trump has demanded they do — “before real spending cuts are agreed to and in place.” They also complained that Johnson had failed to promise that the major tax and budget bill the GOP is preparing to advance “reduces spending and the deficit in real terms,” or to stop putting legislation on the floor that requires Democratic votes to pass. It all foreshadowed more headaches to come for Johnson, who will be working with a historically slim majority — which is on track to shrink by two members when they depart to join the Trump administration — and an embittered group of conservatives. Rep.

Chip Roy of Texas, one of the Republicans who initially abstained but then voted for Johnson at the very end, made it clear that his reservations had not vanished and that there remained profound resistance to the speaker in GOP ranks.

OPINION

Is anime the cause of suicide in teens



DR HAMED
AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

AFEW MONTHS AGO, I came across a study claiming that six cases of suicide attempts in a school in Oman were attributed to watching Korean dramas and anime. While setting aside the scientific analysis of the study’s methodology, the evidence it relied on, the selection of participants and the tools used to assess suicidal thoughts and attempts, I find the conclusion that watching Korean dramas and anime causes suicide attempts to be scientifically unfounded. Suicide is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors. Readers might wonder, for instance, if watching these shows was indeed the cause, why were there only six cases of suicide, despite a larger viewership? Such analytical questions are crucial to understanding the results of this study. This news prompted me to explore anime series and their potential to cause addiction. The term ‘anime’ refers to a style of animation, including series, comics and movies, that is heavily influenced by Japanese art and storytelling techniques. Anime originated in Japan in the early 1960s and has since spread worldwide, attracting viewers of all ages. It is characterised by

vibrant colours, energetic characters and diverse stories — some realistic, others fantastical. These stories often carry layered meanings and complex plots, presented in short episodes that capture the audience’s attention. Personally, when I think of anime, the character ‘Pikachu’ from Pokémon comes to mind — a yellow, cat-like creature with a soft voice that emits electricity to fight evil. Anime addiction is similar to video game addiction and affects individuals differently. While one person may become addicted to a single game or show, another might remain unaffected even with longer exposure. Adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 are particularly vulnerable to anime addiction, possibly because this stage of life is marked by various pressures. Some teens turn to anime, with its idealised scenarios and happy endings, as an escape from their real-world challenges. Psychology tells us that anime addiction can dominate a teenager’s focus, isolating them from family and friends, and discouraging participation in activities they once enjoyed. They may become irritable and anxious,

Psychology tells us that anime addiction can dominate a teenager’s focus, isolating them from family and friends and discouraging participation in activities they once enjoyed

neglect their studies and even spend large sums on purchasing anime films. Some teens take their passion further by dressing up as their favourite anime characters and mimicking their speech, deepening their immersion in this fantasy world. In Japan, conferences and parties are held for anime enthusiasts, where they create their realm, play video games and eat themed foods. However, it’s worth noting that most anime fans lose interest as they grow older and engage with other aspects of life. Nonetheless, parents should monitor what their teens watch and how they spend their time, fostering open and thoughtful dialogue instead of resorting to fear tactics or strict prohibitions. Strict bans often backfire, as teens may watch anime in secret, viewing it as a form of rebellion against a ‘controlling’ parent from an older generation that fails to understand or appreciate anime. In my opinion, fostering open communication, understanding adolescents’ interests and addressing their mental health concerns holistically are far more effective approaches to preventing anime addiction.

CARTER’S MIDDLE EAST PEACE LEGACY SURVIVES

BAHIRA AMIN & RUTH EGLASH

US president Jimmy Carter, who died last week, left an enduring legacy when he brokered historic peace between Egypt and Israel — tepid and shaky, but unbroken even by the nearly 15-month long Gaza war. “For 45 years we’ve had no war” with Egypt, said Ruth Wasserman Lande, a former Israeli diplomat in Cairo. But, she said, “I would not go as far as to say it’s a peace.” Egypt and Israel have maintained close trade relations, security collaboration and diplomatic ties for nearly half a century since the agreement that made Cairo the first Arab government to recognise Israel. The 1979 treaty saw Israel return the vast Sinai peninsula occupied in war years earlier, and Cairo became one of the top recipients of US military aid alongside neighbouring Israel. Government officials in Cairo, for example, avoid clear references to Israel in economic briefings despite significant energy trade. The devastating Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, which borders both countries, has reinvigorated Egyptians’ long history of solidarity with Palestinians. And Israeli holidaymakers, who used to flock to Sinai, stopped in October 2023 when the war erupted with Hamas’s attack on Israel. Some analysts accuse Israel of breaching the peace deal with its actions in Gaza. Cairo University professor Mustapha Kamel al Sayyid said the Israeli takeover of the Palestinian side of the Gaza-Egypt border in May was a “flagrant violation of the treaty”. But still, the agreement has survived and analysts agree suspending it is not on the table for either government. On Monday, both Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi and Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paid tribute to Carter’s diplomatic legacy, which earned him a Nobel Peace Prize. Carter made history when he hosted Egyptian President Anwar al Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, beaming as they shook hands at the White House. However, even at the time, the reconciliation ruffled feathers, and Sadat was accused of abandoning the Palestinian cause by recognising Israel. Forty-five years later, Carter himself is remembered differently on opposite sides of the border. “In recent decades, Carter has primarily emerged in connection with his criticism of Israeli policy on Palestinian issues, leading significant portions of the Israeli public to view him as biased,” said Ofir Winter, senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University. The Nobel laureate had infuriated Israel by suggesting that its treatment of the Palestinians could constitute apartheid. And in his 2006 book “Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid”, the former US president criticised Israel’s expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank. For the same reasons, Sayyid said, Carter will be remembered as “the US president who proved the most fair to Arabs”. — AFP

A New Year and a turbulent Arab reality

THE new year 2025 has begun while we were hoping, in most Arab countries, that the circle of revival would expand more widely and that the Arab countries would enjoy security, peace, and the realisation of the human self, and that the Arab countries would be built on citizenship on the basis of the single self, and that the relationship between the Arab countries would be decisive in reviving all Arab countries, and drying up the sources of wars, destruction, extremism, hatred, foreign interventions, and hidden colonialism. Similarly, we were hoping for the achievement of constructive Arab unity around the human self, with freedom of privacy and expanding the circle of freedom of belonging within the circle of self-construction rather than self-destruction. Such wishes emerged as we bid farewell to year 2024 that I do not claim that it has left us in utter despair upon seeing our Arab reality. However, without a doubt it has left us disappointed with the poverty line still expanding in a scary way.

The voice of bygone and extremist ideas remains heard employing social media as a main seductive platform. The public irrational discourse and sectarian conflicts are attempting to rise to the surface once again on the backdrop of an unstable political reality in important Arab countries where there is barely a single regular national state that is capable of protecting its spaces. What happened in Gaza last year was a painful reality for the high value of the human cost in the absence of a unified Arab influence be it political, cultural, social, and religious in preserving human dignity. The event, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, and who is responsible for its occurrence be it right-wing, left-wing or somewhere in between, it does not in any way raise the dignity of the human being or his right to attain human dignity. It is truly unfortunate that in 2024 we are talking about sectarianism while blood is being shed and innocent people are being displaced who do not possess the minimum material dignity that a human being can obtain.



A youth mourns by the body of a victim killed amid the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Hamas, at the Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza City. — AFP



BADR
AL ABRI

The writer is the author of ‘The Jurisprudence of Extremism’

It is unfortunate that we are still fighting over privacy and identity affiliations or issues of past events or engaged in theological conflicts that have become something of the past. The human mind is discovering the laws and systems of the universe for the sake of man while some seek to exploit this advancement to destroy humanity and spread wars and conflict. What we saw in 2024 of instability in the Arab world between countries rife with civil conflicts, countries living under the dictates of foreign powers’ interventions, and countries experiencing economic crises with few countries remaining stable. Notwithstanding, it is plotted to expand the circle of evil to eat away what is left so that the Arab world remains, since the beginning of awakening and liberation from colonialism in the second half of the 19th century, poor and torn and the Arab unity remains elusive. The events that transpired in 2024 indicate that we are regressing backwards instead of moving forward. Unfortunately, the pens of independent intellectuals is retreating due to the lust for likes on social media where the pen of

the independent intellectual is absent from the political, social and religious authority and falling into the authority of social media which has now become a new manifestation of the three authorities: political, social and religious in the practice of hidden exclusion and slow killing which is why we some pens have vanished in the face of this chaos and systematic electronic armies. I do not know for sure whether the Arab world will be improving in the new year and whether the circle of security and stability will expand and achieve the circle of revival and development in a more horizontal manner, or whether the circle of unrest, poverty will extend. The moment when we welcome this year is very confusing to the point of being afraid of the future, however light often emerges from darkness, and good is born from evil and this is what I hope for our Arab reality if will is there provided that it is liberated from its narrow affiliations. The original version of the article appeared in Oman Arabic newspaper’s print version on January 1, 2025

Meeting a genuine need: Fostering inclusivity, empathy



RAY PETERSEN

The writer is a media consultant

ARE we, all of us, aware of the needs of those with special education needs and disabilities, within our communities and societies? Are we genuinely inclusive, supportive and actively caring enough? Or are they someone else's problem?

In the comfort of our homes, schools and workplaces, we almost certainly, on the rare occasions we think about it, because we held a door open for a 'lady in a wheelchair,' or got out of the way of someone on crutches, we probably pride ourselves on being reasonably thoughtful.

We probably give to charities when they ask and almost certainly regard ourselves as part of a dynamic, considerate and inclusive community or society. Certainly, given our personal and societal values, I guess we should feel that we accept every individual for who and what they are, without prejudice or discrimination. But do we?

Can you believe that statistically, a massive 68 per cent of students, globally, have a SEND need, that being the acronym for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and it looks different from almost every individual's perspective. For most of us, special needs though is a lot like an asterisk and acts like a curiosity, a red flag if you like, when the approach we should all be taking, the question we should all be asking, is "Can I

help?"

I'm not sure that most of us do. I think that we shrink away from the challenge of parking our perceived superiority, whether it is physical, educational, or emotional, because to do so scares us. Instead, we should embrace the imperfections of our communities and societies because both are, in effect, wider families and families look out for each other.

If you think about the qualities you look for from your family at home, I'm sure you'll agree that these are the same qualities we need to foster within our school community. Therefore, we can confidently say that we all need to demonstrate greater respect, care, empathy and trust with those around us. If we don't, the SEND students around us will, rather than may, never reach their full potential, neither in education, work, or life, which, when you consider that we all deserve to feel safe and to be our authentic selves.

So, it's right that you ask yourself 'What can be my role in this?' And that support may take the shape of supporting with learning challenges, in assisting with physical disabilities, or with socio-emotional issues. Whether parents, peers, friends or teachers, we need to support SEND learners by being understanding, patient and inclusive, treating each other with respect, empathy and kindness. We can help with tasks, be good

Whether as parents, peers, friends, or teachers, we all share the responsibility to support SEND learners and help cultivate an environment where every individual feels valued, respected and empowered

listeners and include those with SEND in our group activities, demonstrating our empathy and responsibility.

Accordingly, participation becomes something that benefits us significantly, on our own life journey. With this awareness of a compassionate response mantra, we can create a more inclusive, more welcoming environment for everyone at school. After all, it is our differences that make us unique, so we all bring something unique and different to our communities.

To fail in establishing a caring perspective we must appreciate that some of our students with special educational needs and disabilities can be vulnerable and may not always understand social norms like others do and this can make them easy targets for that few among us who may try to take advantage of them.

Let's make sure that we treat everyone, whether need or not, with the respect and kindness they deserve. Let's remember... a little kindness goes a long way towards making the world a better place for all of us and as our good friend and colleague Angie Wade always says, "It's nice to be nice."

We must strive to support, respect, listen, empathise, include, trust and be trusted. In doing so, we can create an inclusive and supportive community where everyone feels valued and accepted.

CHINA'S NORTH EAST THRIVES ON POTATO TOURISM BOOM

MARY YANG

Animal ears and pom-poms on fuzzy hats adorn tourists' heads on the streets of the frigid northeastern Chinese city of Harbin, which is enjoying a surge in visitors driven by social media. Photos and videos taken around the city's landmarks flood platforms such as TikTok counterpart Douyin and Instagram-esque Xiaohongshu — many featuring tourists from the warmer south.

They're affectionately known as "southern little potatoes", a reference to their alleged smaller stature and cutesy winter gear that contrast with the area's stereotypically coarse character.

A search for "southern little potatoes visit the north" racked up more than 428,000 notes on Xiaohongshu.

That's where Chen Xiting, who works in e-commerce in the southern province of Guangdong, said she was inspired to visit.

"It's the quickest way young people get trip recommendations," said Chen.

She said she had noticed a sizeable number of fellow southerners.

"I heard quite a bit of Cantonese, which we're very familiar with, today at tourist sites and on the street," said the 29-year-old, wearing a hat with dog ears and with only her face exposed to the air.

Liu Rong, a student from Sichuan, said the city's push for more southern tourists was clear from the surge in videos about Harbin he often watched with his wife. "These years, especially this year, Harbin's cultural tourism has placed a lot of importance on paying attention to us southerners," Liu said.

Harbin is the capital of Heilongjiang, one of three provinces that make up the 'Dongbei' (northeast) region, where temperatures can reach -30 degrees Celsius during winter. Bordered by Russia and North Korea, it is one of China's poorest provinces, outperforming only neighbouring Jilin, Gansu, Hainan island and sparsely populated Tibet, Qinghai and Ningxia.

But the first five months of 2024 saw the operating income of Heilongjiang's cultural, sports and entertainment industries rise nearly 60 per cent year-on-year, according to official data.

Tourists spent 154 billion yuan (\$21 billion) in the first half of 2024, up 171 per cent from the first half of 2023.

Popular novels and dramas set in the northeast have also helped spark a travel boom to the region.

"A lot of southerners, which we call 'little potatoes', came over here for travel and made our Harbin very trendy," Emily Liu, a local tour guide, said. The online fame has been good for the travel business, said 30-year-old Jiang Zhonglong, energetically gesticulating in front of his tripod just metres away from Liu. He started working for a Harbin-based travel agency three years ago, during the Covid-19 pandemic and said business was now much better. — AFP

A legacy of tolerance and unity in Islam

OMAN had been one of the few countries that embraced Islam without a fight. The first Omani to join the new religion of Islam was the companion Mazen bin Ghadouba al Sadi in the 6th year of Hijrah, who spread Islam in Oman upon his return from a visit to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH).

The people of Oman had taken up the new religion willingly and gladly without hesitation in the 8th year of Hijrah when the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) sent letters to the two kings, Jaifar and Abd, the sons of Al Julanda, inviting them to embrace Islam.

By recalling the way Omanis took up Islam, the occurrence illustrates an instructive example and a vivid lesson from history. Omanis accepted the religion by choice and without being brought about upon them by force. This reflects that Omanis had the power of choosing and determining and the inherent traits of tolerance Omanis did enjoy, on the other hand.

When asked about Omanis, the open acknowledgment of the Prophet (PBUH) is the best testament to noble people. The Prophet (PBUH) succinctly said that if you go to see or stay at Oman, no one shall insult or curse you. In fact, this is a testimony that Omanis hold dear until they pass away.

As kind-hearted people, Omanis do not treat others with insolence, indignity, or contempt. They rather welcome strangers and visitors warmly to their country, regardless of their origin, race, colour, or religion.

Besides, Omanis accept the beliefs, feelings, habits and behaviours of other groups and cultures as legitimate even when they differ from their own, as long as others accept and do not lack special regard or respect to Omanis religion and beliefs.

While Omanis can best be described as kind and hospitable, they uphold and elevate their moral and cultural values to a strong and emphatic extent. However, they do not accept at the same behaviour that disrespects their religion and



DR MUSALLAM AL MAANI

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beliefs. Further, Omanis do not behave with pride and arrogance, nor do they make a vainglorious display of what they are or have or have done. They do not also show vain display of their own worth and attainments, by calling attention to what they do pridefully and boastfully. Bragging assertive statements are not typical of Omanis way of conduct or manner.

Visitors and residents are expected to give and take mutually the respect and kindness shown to Omanis and their country by shunning as well as avoiding deliberately actions or words that might go beyond limits set or prescribed by the cultural, religious and moral code of conduct of the Omani people.

That is why Oman is truly home to Islamic tolerance. The best testimony to this is the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. For those who wish to convert to or

know about Islam, they may visit MoARA, whereby the Omani staff speak well of Islam and never incite nor do they urge others to embrace any Islamic sect. They genuinely adhere to the Quranic verse in Sura 75: An Nahl, Verse 25 which says invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner.

In Oman, there are three predominant Islamic schools of thought, namely Ibadi, Sunni and Shiite. The adherents of the three schools live in peace with each other. The way Omanis work, congregate and pray together is marked by accord in sentiment and action. Omanis firmly believe in unity and support to each other, mutual dependence, solidarity and cooperation, and strength through togetherness. They act in adherence to the Prophet hadith which says a believer to another believer is like a solidly built structure.

SPORTS



Bahrain players celebrate on the podium after winning the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup final match between Oman and Bahrain at Jaber al Ahmad al Sabah Stadium in Kuwait City. — AFP



BAHRAIN EDGE OMAN TO CLINCH GULF CUP

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

BAHRAIN

WERE CROWNED champions of the Gulf Cup 26 after their thrilling 2-1 victory over Oman in the final at Jaber Al Ahmad Stadium.

The match began with the kickoff in favour of the Bahrain, but Oman quickly gained control of the ball and dominated the early minutes of the game. The first chance for the Omani team came in the sixth minute when Jameel al Yahmadi delivered a precise cross from the right flank, but the Bahraini goalkeeper managed to clear it.

On the other hand, Mahdi Humaidan missed a golden

opportunity for the Bahraini team in the 12th minute when he struck a high shot over the crossbar. In the 16th minute, Oman our national team earned a corner kick, which Abdulrahman al Mushaifri successfully converted into the first goal following a brilliant cross from Ali al Busaidi.

The Bahraini players then tried to impose their style and dominate possession in an effort to equalise, but the Omani defence remained solid and thwarted all attempts. In the 31st minute, Abdulrahman al Mushaifri nearly added a second goal with a shot from a low corner, but it came to nothing.

In the 33rd minute, Ali al Busaidi was awarded a free kick near the penalty area, but it was not executed as planned. The Omani team continued to control the game in the final minutes of

the first half, with Al Mushaifri earning a free kick after a strong challenge from Amin Benaddi in the 41st minute.

In the 44th minute, Ali Maddad almost scored the equaliser for Bahrain after a dangerous counterattack, but luck was not on his side. The referee added three minutes of stoppage time, during which Al Mushaifri had another dangerous opportunity, but his shot went wide of the goal. The first half ended with the Oman leading 1-0.

CLEAR DETERMINATION
The Bahraini team entered the second half with clear determination to press on the Omani goal in search of an equaliser but was unable to create any significant scoring opportunities. In the 49th minute,

the Omani team came close to extending their lead with a swift counterattack led by Jameel al Yahmadi, but Bahraini defender Amin Benaddi managed to clear the ball at the last moment.

The Omani team suffered a major blow in the 57th minute when defender Ahmed al Khamisi sustained an injury, forcing the coach to bring in replacement Mulham al Siniady. In the 58th minute, Mohammed Marhoon nearly scored the equaliser for Bahrain after receiving a well-placed pass from teammate Mohammed al Rumaihi, but his effort fell short.

Both teams continued to exchange opportunities until the 75th minute, which marked a turning point in the match. Bahrain was awarded a penalty after Jameel al Yahmadi's

challenge on Mohammed Marhoon. Marhoon stepped up and successfully converted the penalty, levelling the score for Bahrain.

Just a few minutes later, Bahrain added a dramatic second goal. A cross from Mohammed Marhoon deflected off Omani defender Mohammed al Musallami and found its way into the net. Despite Oman's attempts to stage a comeback in the remaining minutes, the Bahraini players held on to their lead until the final whistle, securing a 2-1 victory.

Among individual awards, Bahrain's Mohammed Marhoon claimed twin honours winning the top scorer and best player awards in the tournament, while teammate Ibrahim Lutfalla won the best goalkeeper award.

NO PLANS



Rohit Sharma said he opted out due to poor form.

I'M NOT RETIRING, SAYS ROHIT AFTER LOSING TEST SPOT

SYDNEY: Indian Test skipper Rohit Sharma said sitting out the final match of the series against Australia due to poor form does not mean he will retire, adding that critics will not decide when he should walk away from the sport.

Rohit was dropped after scoring only 31 runs in five innings as India look to draw the final Test and retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, with pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah replacing him as captain in Sydney.

Rohit has only one fifty in his last 15 Test innings, which include 10 single-digit scores, but the 37-year-old said he had confidence in himself to turn things around.

"This decision is not a retirement decision nor am I going to take myself out of the game," Rohit said to Star Sports broadcaster on day two of the Sydney Test.

"I sat out of this match because I'm not scoring runs. There is no guarantee that runs will not come two or five months down the line. I have seen a lot in cricket. Every minute, every second, every day life changes.

"I have belief that things will change, but at the same time I have to be realistic as well. So life won't change by what someone with a mic, pen or laptop writes or says. I've played the game for years.

"They can't decide when we should retire, when we should sit out, when we should captain. I am a sensible man, a mature man, a father of two kids. So I think I know what I need in life."

I AM NOT IN FORM

With India trailing 2-1 ahead of the fifth and final Test, Rohit said he "stood down" after a discussion with the selectors and head coach Gautam Gambhir, who had declined to confirm on the eve of the game if the batter would play.

The match is finely poised with India at 141-6 in the second innings, leading Australia by 145 runs.

"The chat that I had with the coach and the selector was very simple — my bat is not scoring runs, I am not in form, this is an important match and we need players who are in form," Rohit added.

"The boys are not in great form. So I had this simple thought in my mind — we can't carry out-of-form players.

"That's why I thought I should inform the coach and the selector about what's on my mind. They backed my decision. They said, 'You've been playing for many years, you're the best judge of what you are doing.'"

India's next Test series is against England in June when Rohit will be 38. — Reuters



India's Rishabh Pant in action against Australia during the second day of fifth Test at Sydney Cricket Ground. — Reuters

Pant lights fuse as India lead Australia by 145 runs

AN EXPLOSIVE Rishabh Pant slammed the second-fastest Indian Test half-century on Saturday to drive the visitors to a 145-run lead with four wickets left after an intense day two of the decisive fifth Test against Australia.

At the close in Sydney, India were 141-6 with Ravindra Jadeja on eight and Washington Sundar on six after they dismissed Australia for 181 in reply to their first-innings 185.

Australia lead the series 2-1 with India needing to win at the Sydney Cricket Ground to retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

Pant signalled his intent by plundering a six on his first ball and reached 50 after just 29 deliveries with another big shot that cleared the ropes.

Only his 28-ball half-century against Sri Lanka in 2022 was faster for India.

He was finally dismissed for 61 off 33 by Pat Cummins, but Scott Boland was India's main tormentor, taking 4-42.

Pant's exploits set up an exciting finale, amid doubts over whether skipper Jasprit Bumrah will take any further part.

He left the field after bowling one over following lunch and was driven from the SCG, likely for hospital scans. Bumrah was seen returning before stumps.

In his absence, Prasidh Krishna (3-42), Mohammed Siraj (3-51) and Nitish Kumar Reddy (2-32) stepped up to fill the void and dismiss Australia after they resumed on 9-1.

"It's been a hell of a Test, it's been in fast-forward mode," said Australian all-rounder

Beau Webster, who top-scored with 57 and took a wicket.

"With the amount of wickets, I am just happy that I could contribute with the bat, few catches and wicket there as well, so really happy.

"It's a real tussle," he added. "We don't know what a good score is yet and obviously plenty on offer for the quicks."

Yashasvi Jaiswal got India's second innings off with a bang, crunching four boundaries from the first over by Mitchell Starc. But the opening partnership was quickly shattered when KL Rahul was bowled for 13 by Boland, whose line and length was impeccable.

He pounced again in his next over with a ball that jagged back to deliver the same punishment to Jaiswal (22).

Virat Kohli desperately needed a big score — for himself and the team — but failed to deliver again, perishing in the slips for six with his nemesis Boland once more the destroyer. It was likely the 36-year-old Kohli's last Test innings in Australia, with India usually only visiting every four years.

Webster claimed Shubman Gill (13) as his first Test wicket, but at the other end Pant was on a mission until an edge off Cummins carried to wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

Boland claimed his fourth to remove Reddy cheaply.

"As many runs as possible would be great for us because we don't know what the wicket will be behaving like for us," said Prasidh. "There's no particular number in mind, but as many as we can score. We are

ready to bowl them out for whatever."

DRAMATIC

Australia lost Sam Konstas (23), Marnus Labuschagne (two), Travis Head (four) and Steve Smith (33) before lunch.

In front of his home crowd, Smith looked set to become only the 15th batsman and fourth Australian to reach 10,000 Test runs.

But he was made to wait, five runs short, after Prasidh enticed an edge to Rahul in the slips. The home side resumed after a dramatic final-ball wicket on Friday when Bumrah — captaining the side after Rohit Sharma was "rested" — had Usman Khawaja caught. That Australian body blow came two balls after Bumrah and Konstas had a tense exchange. The 19-year-old Konstas padded up again on seven with new partner Labuschagne, who didn't last with Bumrah getting the faintest edge to Pant.

A fearless Konstas slammed Bumrah to the boundary, then produced an audacious reverse ramp shot for another four.

But the teenager overplayed his hand and fell to a Siraj outswinger, attempting a drive that flew to Jaiswal at gully.

Siraj removed Head in the same over with another gem to leave Australia at 39-4.

Smith and Webster, who replaced the dropped Mitchell Marsh, began the rebuild before Prasidh dismissed the veteran just before lunch and bowled Carey soon after their return.

India then took 3-4, with Reddy at the forefront, as the tail collapsed. — AFP

Pakistan in trouble after Rickelton leads South African run feast

CAPE TOWN: South African wicketkeeper Kyle Verreynne said his side "need nine more big wickets" after the Proteas dominated Pakistan on the second day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands on Saturday.

Pakistan were 64-3 at the close after double centurion Ryan Rickelton led South Africa to a first innings total of 615.

Verreynne, who hit 100 in a 148-run partnership with Rickelton, said the absence of Pakistan opening batsman Saim Ayub, out for up to six weeks with a broken ankle, made South Africa's task easier.

"We are focusing on taking nine more wickets, then it will be their tail-enders to come," said Verreynne of the task of bowling out Pakistan

twice. South Africa, already assured of a place in the World Test championship final in England in June, are seeking a seventh successive Test win.

"We have three days to go," said Verreynne. "We have to stay nice and patient, stay in the channel and the loose shots will come."

Kagiso Rabada struck twice and Marco Jansen once when Pakistan started their innings.

Babar Azam, forced to open the batting in Ayub's absence, was 31 not out at the close with his side still 551 runs behind.

Left-handed opening batsman Rickelton made a chanceless 259, South Africa's joint seventh highest Test score, before he was seventh man out with the total on 557.



South Africa's Ryan Rickelton celebrates after scoring 250 runs during the second day of the second Test match. — AFP

South African captain Temba Bavuma opted to keep Pakistan in the field until the last man, 18-year-old debutant Kwen Maphaka, was out 40 minutes after tea.

By then, South Africa had added 299 runs to their overnight 316-4, scoring at almost five runs an over.

NICE BATTING WITH HIM

Resuming on 176, Rickelton was content to play the anchor role while Verreynne hit 100 off 147 balls in a sixth-wicket partnership of 148 off 222 deliveries.

"It was so nice batting with him," Verreynne said of his partnership with Rickelton.

"I thought he would be really tired after batting the whole day yesterday but he was so calm, it just

felt like he could do this for ages. It put me at ease and I could just bat normally."

A rapid seventh-wicket stand of 86 was ended when Rickelton was caught at mid-on going for a big hit after batting for 607 minutes. He faced 343 balls and hit 29 fours and three sixes.

Jansen made 62 off 54 balls and Keshav Maharaj hit 40 off 35 deliveries as the bowlers continued to take a pounding.

South Africa's innings ended when Maphaka was bowled second ball for nought to become the 100th Test wicket for Mohammad Abbas.

At 18 years 270 days, Maphaka became South Africa's youngest Test player when the match started on Friday. — AFP

SPORTS

BRISBANEINTL



Mirra Andreeva and Diana Shnaider beat Hon/Kalinskaya 7-6(6), 7-5 to claim the women's doubles title in Brisbane International.

SABALENKA
SWEEPS INTO FINAL,
DIMITROV
RETIRES HURT

BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA: World number one Aryna Sabalenka brushed aside Russian teenage sensation Mirra Andreeva to storm into the final of the Brisbane International on Saturday, as men's defending champion Grigor Dimitrov retired with soreness.

Sabalenka broke Andreeva once in the first set and twice in the second to win 6-3, 6-2 in an ominous display just over a week before she launches her Australian Open defence.

Sabalenka, runner-up in Brisbane in 2024, has won the last two Australian Opens and the way she absorbed the pressure from Andreeva in the first set, then turned the screws in the second, showed why she is considered a strong chance to make it three in a row this year.

"I definitely think that I have improved a lot mentally, physically and skills as well," the Belarusian said.

"I think every year I'm getting a little bit better." Sabalenka now plays Russian qualifier Polina Kudermetova, who continued her fairytale week when she beat Ukraine's Anhelina Kalinina 6-4, 6-3.

In the men's draw, Dimitrov retired from his semi-final with a painful hip.

Unseeded Czech player Jiri Lehecka was leading 6-4, 4-4 when the Bulgarian left the court with the physiotherapist for a medical timeout.

Dimitrov, ranked 10 in the world, returned but played one point before retiring.

Lehecka will play giant American Reilly Opelka, who has one of the biggest serves in the game.

It will be the 23-year-old Lehecka's fourth final on the ATP Tour and he will be aiming to add the Brisbane title to his Adelaide win last January.

"I will need to be focused 100 per cent all the time," Lehecka said about facing Opelka's huge serve in the final.

"I will need to focus on every point, every chance, because the chance can be gone in a very small moment."

Opelka, who was ranked 17 in the world before being forced out of the game for almost two years with wrist and hip injuries, managed to outserve rising French star Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard.

He broke the Frenchman in the first set then was able to take the tie-break to win 6-3, 7-6 (7/4).

"It's great to be in another final — I didn't think I'd be playing in one at all," Opelka said.

"But once I was out of pain I had confidence that I could make it back." — AFP



Coco Gauff of the US reacts during her semifinal match against Czech Republic's Karolina Muchova in the United Cup. — Reuters



Poland's Iga Swiatek played a starring role for Poland in their semifinal against Kazakhstan as she beat Elena Rybakina. — Reuters

GAUFF, SWIATEK TO
CLASH FOR UNITED CUP

COCO GAUFF AND IGA SWIATEK will battle for United Cup glory after the USA and Poland won their respective semifinals on Saturday in Sydney amid bizarre circumstances.

Swiatek beat Elena Rybakina to help last year's runners-up Poland see off Kazakhstan, and they were joined in Sunday's final of the mixed-teams tournament by the Gauff-led United States.

The Americans defeated the Czech Republic, with Gauff beating Karolina Muchova and then an increasingly irate Tomas Machac retiring from his match against Taylor Fritz in an abrupt and bewildering ending.

"I woke up so late today," said Gauff, 20, after she dismissed Muchova 6-1, 6-4 to underline what a threat she will be at the Australian Open starting next week.

Gauff, the world number three, added: "The whole match I was intense and focused, that made the difference today."

Big-serving Fritz, ranked fourth in the world, lost the first set on a tie break but fought back in the second and looked poised

to level up their men's singles match when a hot and bothered Machac shook hands, sending the Americans through.

"Not the way I want to win in the end, but I think we're all happy to be through to the final," said Fritz.

He said that his opponent, who had ranted at the Czech bench and squandered chances to seal the match, told him afterwards he had cramp.

"I didn't expect it to end so abruptly. I did not notice at the time that he was cramping," said Fritz.

PERFECT

Five-time Grand Slam champion Swiatek played a starring role for Poland in their semifinal against Kazakhstan as she beat Rybakina 7-6 (7/5), 6-4.

"This win makes me really proud," Swiatek said after giving Poland an unassailable 2-0 lead in the tie.

"It is perfect preparation for the Australian Open," said the world number two.

Swiatek again played with strapping on her right thigh, having been troubled in

her tough three-set win over Britain's Katie Boulter in the quarterfinals.

That clash lasted nearly three hours, and Swiatek was slow out of the blocks against Rybakina, who is ranked sixth in the world.

They went to a first-set tie break after Rybakina saved two set points, before the 23-year-old Pole pulled away to take her country into the final.

"I for sure did not start well and had the handbrake on a bit. I knew I had to do something and change the momentum," said Swiatek, who made light of any injury concerns.

She is relishing the prospect of a meeting with Gauff.

"I think at this stage she's developing every month and it's going to be also a nice challenge," she said.

Hubert Hurkacz put Poland on the way when he beat Alexander Shevchenko 6-3, 6-2 in the men's singles.

The 16th-ranked Hurkacz lost both his singles matches in group play but defeated Britain's Billy Harris in the quarterfinals and took that momentum into the meeting with Shevchenko. — AFP

BUSINESS

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Unemployment rate declines to 3.6%

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) has confirmed a continued decline in Oman's unemployment rate, which fell to 3.6 per cent by the end of November 2024 compared to 4.3 per cent in October and 4.7 per cent in September.

The data indicates that the unemployment rate among males dropped to 1.9 per cent by the end of November compared to 2.3 per cent in the previous month, while the rate for females decreased to 10.3 per cent, down from 12 per cent in October.

This decline is attributed to effective government policies aimed at providing job opportunities for citizens in both the public and private sectors. The Ministry of Labour announced the creation of numerous job opportunities during

2024, working closely with private sector institutions to offer roles that align with Omanis' qualifications and skills. Efforts have also focused on enhancing training and development programmes to equip job seekers with the skills needed to meet market demands and contribute to economic growth.

The statistics revealed that the unemployment rate among bachelor's degree holders decreased to 7.1 per cent by the end of November, down from 8.4 per cent in October. Similarly, the rate for higher diploma holders dropped to 8.9 per cent, compared to 10.4 per cent. The rate for general diploma holders declined to 6.5 per cent, while master's and doctorate holders saw a reduction to 0.6 per cent compared to 0.7 per cent in the previous month.



The total number of Omani employees in both the public, private sectors reached 848,932 by November end

By age group, the unemployment rate among those under 24 years decreased to 13.9 per cent by the end of November, down from 17.5 per cent in October. Among those aged 25-29, the rate fell to 6.1 per cent, while for the 30-34 age group, it dropped to 3.6 per cent. Older age groups recorded even lower rates, with the 35-39 age group at 2 per cent, and those aged 40 and above at just 1 per cent.

The highest unemployment rate was recorded in Al Dhahirah Governorate at 6.5 per cent, followed by Musandam Governorate at 5.9 per cent. Al Batinah North Governorate recorded 5.2 per cent, while Muscat Governorate had the lowest rate at 1.6 per cent.

Meanwhile, the total number of Omani employees in both the public and private sectors

reached 848,932 by the end of November 2024, representing a 2.9 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2023. Of these, 384,121 Omanis were employed in the public sector, 400,723 in the private sector, 62,088 in the family sector, and 1,981 in the charitable sector.

The data shows that most Omanis are employed in clerical roles, with 206,800 workers in this category. This is followed by 140,000 specialists in scientific, technical and humanities fields, and 125,200 employees working as administrative and business managers. Other occupations include engineering professionals (85,900 workers), service-related roles (86,000 workers), and agricultural, livestock and fishing jobs (49,800 workers).

Madayn to host Al Mazunah Economic Exhibition and Forum



Al Mazunah Free Zone is an important hub straddling Oman's border with Yemen in the south

Al MAZYOUNA: The Al Mazunah Free Zone, affiliated with the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), is making significant efforts to enhance the national economy by playing a pivotal role in connecting the Omani market with regional and international markets. This creates new opportunities for local companies to export their products and services and strengthens prospects for partnerships with investors from around the world.

Eng Ahmed bin Khamis al Kasbi, Director-General of the Al Mazunah Free Zone, stated that Madayn will organise the Al Mazunah Economic Exhibition and Forum on January 19, in cooperation with the Public Authority for Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) and the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI). The event aims to promote commercial

cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Yemen.

It will provide an exceptional platform for local and international companies to explore investment opportunities, build strategic partnerships and expand into regional markets.

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), Al Kasbi noted that the forum is an important event targeting local and international institutions and companies. It seeks to provide an ideal platform for the business sector to explore investment opportunities, establish strategic partnerships, and expand regional markets. The event will attract service companies, factories, brand representatives, car dealerships, import and export firms, logistics companies, food product suppliers, and small and medium enterprises.

He added that the forum is part of the Al Mazunah Free Zone's efforts to strengthen its position as an economic and strategic hub connecting Omani and Yemeni markets. It offers companies an opportunity to showcase their services and products, facilitate access to the Yemeni market, and expand in the automotive sector.

Al Kasbi also highlighted that with the growing importance of the Al Mazunah Free Zone as an economic and commercial centre, this forum presents a unique opportunity for traders and companies to explore the business environment in the region and benefit from the facilities offered by the free zone.

Additionally, the event allows traders and shoppers from the Republic of Yemen to participate in the exhibition without needing a visa, requiring only an electronic permit.

Green Tech Mining & Services LLC Sets a New Standard for Sustainability in Oman



Green Tech Mining & Services LLC, a joint venture between Oman Mining Company and Austria-based BPG Precious Metal Storage Plc (BPG), has achieved a significant milestone in its journey towards environmentally responsible mining practices. BPG, the parent company, has been awarded the prestigious Austrian Ecolabel by Austria's Federal Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Infrastructure, and Technology (BMK). This recognition sets Green Tech Mining & Services position as a pioneer in aligning its mine tailings remediation project in Oman with global ecological and social sustainability standards.

The Austrian Ecolabel for Sustainable Financial Products validates the company's integration of ecological and social considerations in its operations, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This certification guarantees adherence to rigorous standards for projects financed through Green Bonds, with independent audits reinforcing a commitment to transparency and accountability.

Adding to this momentum, BPG Precious Metal Storage Plc, a company with their focus

in sustainable practices within the mining industry, has announced the issuance of a Green Bond aimed at fully financing their Oman project that aligns with its environmental and sustainability goals. Known for its innovative approaches to tailings remediation, sustainable resource recovery, and the rehabilitation of legacy mining sites, BPG remains persistent in its commitment to responsible mining and adherence to global environmental standards.

The Green Bond, developed under the guidelines of the Green Bond Principles (GBP) by the International Capital Market Association (ICMA), reflects BPG's dedication to transparency, accountability, and ecological stewardship. The bond aligns with the EU Taxonomy's environmental objectives and Paris Climate Agreement goals, targeting key impact areas such as pollution prevention, sustainable water management, climate change adaptation, and environmentally sound resource management.

"We are honoured to lead the way in sustainability as the first Company in the GCC to achieve this prestigious recognition," said Ernst Grisseemann, Chairman of Green Tech Mining & Services LLC. "This award highlights our dedication to responsible financial investment through Green Bonds, marking the world's first one-of-a-kind mining remediation project to leverage such funding while prioritizing social well-being and environmental preservation."

As a key player to support Oman's mining industry, Green Tech Mining & Services is setting new benchmarks in resource recovery with sustainability at its core. The company is set to launch the first phase of its remediation and copper cathode production in January 2025, using advanced technologies to recover valuable resources from historical mine tailings while minimizing environmental impact.

The Austrian Ecolabel certification not only highlights Green Tech Mining & Services' leadership in sustainable mining but also sets a benchmark for advancing sustainability in Oman's mining sector. By adhering to global best practices, the company along with its stakeholders fosters ecological responsibility while contributing to the nation's broader development goals.



The contribution of actively operating institutions to the GDP at current prices during the third quarter of 2024 reached about 82 per cent.

SHORTTAKES

MICROSOFT
PLANS TO INVEST
\$80 BN ON AI-ENABLED
DATA CENTRES IN
FISCAL 2025



Microsoft has been investing billions to enhance its AI infrastructure and broaden its data-centre network. — Reuters

BENGALURU: Microsoft is planning to invest about \$80 billion in fiscal 2025 on developing data centres to train artificial intelligence (AI) models and deploy AI and cloud-based applications, the company said in a blog post on Friday.

Investment in AI has surged since OpenAI launched ChatGPT in 2022, as companies across sectors seek to integrate artificial intelligence into their products and services.

AI requires enormous computing power, pushing demand for specialised data centres that enable tech companies to link thousands of chips together in clusters. Microsoft has been investing billions to enhance its AI infrastructure and broaden its data-centre network.

Analysts expect Microsoft’s fiscal 2025 capital expenditure including capital leases to be \$84.24 billion, according to Visible Alpha.

The company’s capital expenditure in the first quarter of fiscal 2025 rose 5.3 per cent to \$20 billion.

As OpenAI’s primary backer, the tech giant is considered a leading contender among Big Tech companies in the AI race due to its exclusive partnership with the AI chatbot maker.

More than half of Microsoft’s \$80 billion investment will be in the United States, Vice-Chair and President Brad Smith said in the blog post.

“Today, the United States leads the global AI race thanks to the investment of private capital and innovations by American companies of all sizes, from dynamic start-ups to well-established enterprises,” Smith said. — Reuters

OVER RO 8.5 BN ADDED VALUE
FROM PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

MUSCAT: The total added value of private institutions actively operating in the Sultanate of Oman during the third quarter of 2024 amounted to approximately RO 8.511 billion, according to preliminary statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The contribution of actively

operating institutions to the GDP at current prices during the third quarter of 2024 reached about 82 per cent, compared to 81.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2023.

The added value of large enterprises by the end of the third quarter of this year amounted to RO 6.279 billion, representing 60.5 per cent, an increase of 4.3 per

cent compared to the same quarter of the previous year. Meanwhile, the added value of medium-sized enterprises reached RO 665.8 million, representing 6.4 per cent, with an increase of 3 per cent. The added value of small enterprises amounted to RO 716 million, representing 6.9 per cent, with an increase of 3.2 per cent.

ADDED VALUE
The total added value of micro-enterprises stood at RO 851.100 million, representing 8.2 per cent,

with an increase of 3.9 per cent. It is worth noting that the number of employees in private institutions actively operating in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 0.6 per cent by the end of the third quarter of this year, reaching 1,804,547 employees, compared to 1,792,932 employees by the end of the third quarter of 2023. Additionally, the number of institutions reached 260,780 in the third quarter of 2024, marking a growth of 12.1 per cent compared to the same period in 2023. — ONA

GCC trade volume hits
\$1.482 trillion in 2023

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 4

THE TRADE VOLUME of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states reached \$1.482 trillion in 2023, according to the 9th Atlas of GCC Statistics for 2024, compiled by the GCC Statistical Centre.

The atlas highlights key statistical maps, data dashboards and interactive statistical information, showing their distributions both at the country level and within administrative regions. These are illustrated with graphs and geographical maps, linking statistical data to its geographical location, which enhances the value of the information and supports its use in planning across various fields.

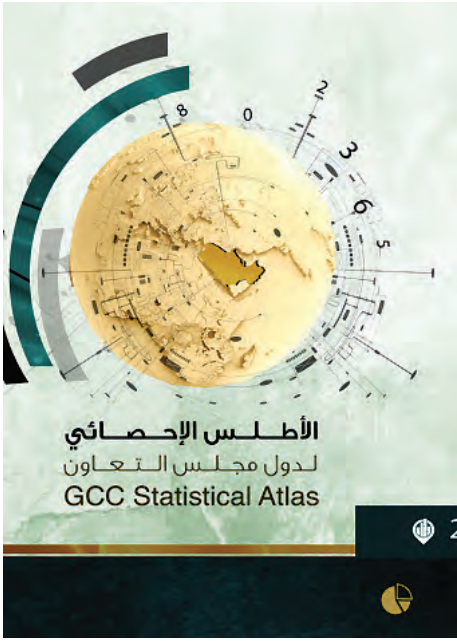
In remarks during the launch of the Atlas, Jassim Mohammed al Budaiwi, Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), emphasised that the project represents one of the most important foundations for planning and development in the journey of joint Gulf cooperation. He explained that the Atlas serves as a live model of data sources that contribute to shaping future policies to achieve further growth and prosperity for the GCC countries under the wise leadership of the GCC leaders.

Intisar hint Abdullah al Wahaibiyah, Director-General of the GCC Statistical Centre, highlighted that the Statistical Atlas is one of the leading annual publications in the field of geographic information systems. She added that the Atlas was presented in an innovative manner by integrating statistical indicators with geographic information, which enhances access to data and enables deeper and more comprehensive analysis.

Total commodity exports amounted to \$823.1 billion, with national oil exports making up 63.8 per cent, non-oil exports 19.3 per

“The Statistical Atlas is one of the leading annual publications in the field of geographic information systems. She added that the Atlas was presented in an innovative manner by integrating statistical indicators with geographic information, which enhances access to data and enables deeper and more comprehensive analysis.

INTISAR BINT ABDULLAH AL WAHAIBIYAH
Director-General of the GCC Statistical Centre



The population of the six GCC countries reached 57.6 million in 2023, compared to 56.6 million in 2022.

cent, and re-exports 16.9 per cent. Intra-GCC commodity exports were valued at \$131.6 billion.

In macroeconomic terms, the GCC’s nominal GDP stood at \$2.113 trillion in 2023, with an annual growth rate decrease of 3.5 per cent compared to 2022. The inflation rate in the GCC was recorded at 2.2 per cent in 2023.

The population of the six GCC countries reached 57.6 million in 2023, compared to 56.6 million in 2022. Males accounted for 62.4 per cent of the total population, while females made up 37.6 per cent. The report also indicates that the population density was 23.9 people per square kilometre, with the total area of the GCC countries amounting to 2.4 million square kilometres.

The Atlas revealed that the total workforce in the GCC countries reached approximately 33.1 million in 2023, compared to 30.3 million in 2022. According to the GCC Statistical Centre, 45.0 million people were of working age (15

years and above) in the GCC countries in 2023.

The Atlas also reported marriage and divorce statistics, showing that the marriage rate in 2022 stood at 4.7 contracts per 1,000 people aged 15 and above in the GCC, while the divorce rate was 1.8 cases per 1,000 people in the same age group.

In terms of education, the total number of students in early childhood education, including nurseries and kindergartens, reached 712,400 in the 2021/2022 academic year. Meanwhile, the total number of school students across the GCC was 8.9 million for the same period.

Regarding healthcare, the GCC had approximately 843 government hospitals in 2022, representing 58.4 per cent of the total, with private hospitals accounting for 41.6 per cent. The number of hospital beds across the GCC reached 122,100, with 74.6 per cent in government hospitals and 25.4 per cent in private ones. The number of physicians stood at 29.6 per 10,000 residents, while there were 61.2 nurses per 10,000 residents in 2022.

For water statistics, the Centre reported an 18.8-per cent average annual growth in rainfall across the GCC between 2000 and 2022, with 214.1 billion cubic metres of rainfall recorded in 2022. The production of desalinated water grew by 9.0 per cent annually over the same period. In 2022, 1.4 billion cubic metres of treated water were used for irrigation, 3.7 billion cubic metres of surface water were recorded, and the number of wastewater treatment plants increased by 10.1 per cent compared to 2021.

Tourism statistics showed that 68.1 million tourists visited the GCC in 2023. The region had 10,900 hotel establishments, offering a total of 696,600 rooms.

In telecommunications, the GCC had 5.5 million fixed phone lines and 94.9 million mobile subscriptions in 2023.

Oil heads for weekly gains on colder weather, Chinese policy support

HOUSTON: Oil prices edged higher on Friday and were on track for weekly gains as cold weather in Europe and the US as well as additional economic stimulus flagged by China helped push prices in the previous session to their highest in more than two months.

Brent crude futures were up 69 cents, or 0.9 per cent, at \$76.62 a barrel by 12:49 pm ET (1749 GMT) after settling on Thursday at the highest level since October 25. US West Texas Intermediate crude gained \$1.11, or 1.5 per cent, to \$74.24. Brent was on track for a 3.3-per cent weekly gain, while WTI was set for a 5-per cent increase.

Signs of Chinese economic fragility heightened expectations of policy measures to boost growth in the world’s top oil importer.

“China just is unceasing

at this point in terms of their announcements about trying to stoke economic activity, and the market’s taking note of that,” said John Kilduff, partner at Again Capital in New York.

Worries about Chinese demand were a factor in bearish demand assumptions last year, he added.

China announced a couple of new measures to boost growth this week with a surprise move to raise wages for government workers and the announcement of a sharp increase in funding from ultra-long treasury bonds.

The additional funding is to be used to spur business investment and consumer-boosting initiatives.

Oil is likely to have gained some price support from expected increased demand for heating oil after forecasts for colder weather in



A view of an oil pumpjack in a farmer’s field near Kindersley, Saskatchewan, Canada.

some regions. “Oil demand is likely benefiting from cold temperatures across Europe and the US,” said UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo.

Also supporting prices, US crude stockpiles dropped by 1.2 million barrels to 415.6 million barrels last week, EIA data showed.

Meanwhile US gasoline and distillate inventories jumped as refineries ramped up output, though fuel demand hit a two-year low.

Holding back prices however, the dollar was on track for its best week in about two months, even as it dipped on Friday, on expectations that the US economy will continue to outperform its peers globally this year and that US interest rates will stay relatively higher. Higher rates increase borrowing costs, which can cut economic growth and demand for oil. — Reuters

SHORTTAKES



The main index of MSX rose by 105 points last week, closing at 4,573 points.

MSX MARKET CAP CLIMBS TO RO 27.59 BN BOOSTED BY RISING INDEX

MUSCAT: The Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) recorded a positive performance last week at the start of trading in 2025, with local investment institutions actively purchasing and absorbing selling pressures from individuals.

The main index of MSX rose by 105 points last week, closing at 4,573 points, benefiting from the support of leading companies and the decline in pressures faced by the market in the past three months. Investors are also seizing available opportunities ahead of the initial financial results announcements of public joint-stock companies starting this week.

Last week, the prices of 56 securities increased, while 16 securities saw their prices decline, and another 16 securities remained unchanged. This positive performance led to gains in the sectoral indices of the market. The financial sector index recorded the highest gains, rising by 292 points, approaching the 7,800-point mark. The industrial sector index increased by approximately 138 points, while the services sector index rose by 23 points. The Shariah index added 16 points, closing weekly trading at 422 points.

The price increases recorded by stocks last week reflected positively on the market capitalisation of the MSX, which rose by the end of last week's trading to RO 27.59 billion, registering weekly gains of RO 267.6 million.

Trading data released by the MSX showed that local investment institutions increased their purchases, accounting for 62.5 per cent of the total trading value, compared to 49.9 per cent in sales. Meanwhile, individual investors tended to sell, accounting for 46.3 per cent of the total trading value.

Last week also saw a decrease in trading value, as individual investors sought to reduce their selling offers in anticipation of further improvement in stock prices in the coming weeks. There are optimistic expectations that public joint-stock companies will raise their dividends to shareholders during this year. Trading value declined by 7.7 per cent, from RO 26.8 million to RO 24.7 million, while the number of executed transactions fell by 21.7 per cent, from about 7,800 to 6,107 transactions.

OQ Exploration and Production topped the most traded companies in terms of trading value, with RO 5.3 million, representing 21.6 per cent of total trading value. OQ Basic Industries came second with RO 4.7 million, while Bank Muscat's first-class perpetual bonds came third with RO 2.6 million. Bank Sohar International ranked fourth with RO 2.5 million, while Bank Muscat came fifth with RO 1.8 million. — ONA

‘OMAN CELEBRATES’ NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO LAUNCH THIS WEEK

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), in collaboration with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT), the Ministry of Information, Muscat Municipality, the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA), the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA), and the governorate offices across the Sultanate of Oman, will launch the Discounts and Offers Festival under the slogan ‘Oman Celebrates’ on Thursday, January 9, 2025. The festival will run from January 11 to February 11, 2025, aiming to stimulate economic and commercial activity in Oman, showcase the strength of the national economy, and encourage local and international investments by fostering public-private partnerships and supporting commercial establishments in offering competitive discounts that benefit all segments of society.



The festival aims to stimulate economic and commercial activity in the Sultanate of Oman.

Nasra bint Sultan al Habsiyah, Director-General of Commerce, stated that the launch of the Discounts and Offers Festival comes in celebration of the anniversary of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's accession to power. It emphasises the private sector's role as a key partner in the renewed renaissance Oman is experiencing under His Majesty's leadership.

New partnership to offer blockchain-powered data

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, JAN 4

GULF DOX, IN COLLABORATION with Serenity, has unveiled blockchain-powered data storage solutions for the Omani market.

The common practice in the market is that data solutions are still involved with conventional technology based on Web 2.0 technologies. Gulf Dox, an Omani company, is introducing data storage solutions based on Web 3.

“Our partnership with Serenity is to introduce another layer of security of service integration in data management and data storage. Serenity is bringing in the state-of-the-art technology based on blockchain to enable us to store the data in a more efficient way. Both of us will integrate to provide the solution for storage of soft data in Oman and the region,” said Faris al Balushi, Executive Director of Gulf Dox.

Serenity has its storage facility in Oman.

In addition to the data centre in Oman, Serenity has other centres in the pipeline, said Venkat Naga, CEO, Serenity. “Our objective is to provide secure, scalable and accessible blockchain solutions for

The important aspect is to keep data secured whether it is on your mobile or in the server. The other part of data storage is that it should be easily accessible. Our data centre is inside Oman and serving you from inside Oman. We started our journey from digitising documentation, and now we are moving to the next stage —data security.

SREEKUMAR P
General Manager



Representatives of Gulf Dox and Serenity announcing their partnership over the weekend.

data storage. The partnership with Gulf Dox opens doors to Oman and the GCC. In addition to Oman, we have a system in India, Amsterdam, and other parts of the globe.

The security is the key factor, according to Farsh Fallah, Chief Operating Officer, Serenity; they will not be using the normal log-in method to access and will be using a biometric system.

“We specialise in secured data management and distribution. The data will stay super secure and unhackable. We are using the most advanced technology available today, and it is definitely the first in the region. The important part is that the data will be in Oman and will never leave the country,” he explained.

He pointed out that most of the hacking happens at the log-on and sign-in stage.

“We have done away with that, and for our system we use a card with biometrics on it.” Everyone has data, from governments, businesses, SMEs and individuals.

“The important aspect is to keep data secured whether it is on your mobile or in the server. The other part of data storage is that it should be easily accessible. Our data centre is inside Oman and serving you from inside Oman. We started our journey from digitising documentation, and now we are moving to the next stage —data security,” said Sreekumar P, General Manager, Gulf Dox.

Oman to advance Earth Observation project under Offset

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, JAN 4

AN EARTH Observation satellite centre is among an array of projects identified for implementation during the course of 2025 as part of the Omani government's Partnership for Development (PFD) programme.

Overseen by the Ministry of Finance, the PFD Programme – also known globally as ‘Offset’ – seeks to enable the transfer of advanced technologies and expertise through collaborations with leading international companies. This partnership also contributes to strengthening the capabilities of the national workforce through tech transfer, as well as facilitating exposure to international best

practices.

The newly unveiled 2025 State General Budget lists Offset projects designed to, among other objectives, strengthen the leadership capacities of national cadres, boost in-country quality control capabilities and support training in advanced engineering applications.

Most notable is a plan for the construction of an Earth Station to receive satellite images and support Earth monitoring in cooperation with the National Survey Authority.

Leading international space technology firm Indra had announced, two years ago, that it is establishing an advanced Earth observation satellite centre in Oman. The project was conceived as part of an initiative to help local



The centre will contribute to protecting Oman against climate change and natural disasters, maritime traffic surveillance, urban growth planning and improved services for citizens (Picture for illustration only).

authorities harness satellite data to support urban planning, strengthen protection against natural disasters and generally enhance the competitiveness of the Omani

economy.

According to Spanish-based Indra, the satellite centre will play an important role in supporting a number of strategic national objectives. In addition to land use control and urban planning, satellite data analysed with the aid of the centre will also help in maritime traffic safety, environmental protection and the efficient planning of critical national infrastructure.

Also identified for completion this year is the National Programme for Leadership Development and Future Foresight project in cooperation with the University of Arizona and the Royal Academy of Management. The initiative seeks to secure the graduation of more than 100 trainees and 24 certified

trainers in leadership.

In Dhofar Governorate, a one-of-a-kind Quality Control laboratory of Nakheel Oman is planned for completion this year under the PFD programme. Likewise, a first-of-its-kind Center of Excellence for Training and Advanced Engineering Applications is proposed to be fitted out and equipped this year as part of an Offset initiative.

“The procedures for finalising several frameworks and supplementary agreements with companies committed to the Partnership for Development Programme are currently in progress to implement various projects,” the Ministry of Finance added in its 2025 State General Budget statement.

Bitcoin turned 16 years old, here is where it stands



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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The author is a member of the International Press Association

BITCOIN, THE world's first and largest cryptocurrency, celebrated its 16th birthday this week. On January 3, 2009, in the midst of the global financial crisis, a pseudonymous programmer (or group of programmers) going by the name Satoshi Nakamoto mined the genesis block of the Bitcoin blockchain, kickstarting a technological and financial revolution that continues to reverberate across the globe today.

Sixteen years later, Bitcoin has matured from an obscure experiment to a trillion dollar asset class, with a current market capitalisation approaching \$1.9 trillion and a price hovering around \$100,000 per coin. The cryptocurrency has weathered multiple boom and bust cycles, overcoming skepticism, regulatory challenges and occasional scandal to cement its position as “digital gold” and a viable alternative to traditional fiat currencies.

However, Bitcoin's 16th anniversary comes at a time of mixed signals for the cryptocurrency market. While the Bitcoin network itself continues to set records for security and resilience - mining difficulty reached an all-time high this week - institutional inflows have slowed in some areas.

BlackRock's iShares Bitcoin Trust, a bellwether for institutional crypto adoption, recorded its largest ever single-day outflow of \$333 million on January 2. Overall outflows from Bitcoin ETFs totalled \$242 million that

day, reversing inflows from the prior week. Analysts attribute the shift to jitters over the regulatory environment and a more hawkish stance from the US Federal Reserve, which has been tightening monetary policy to combat inflation.

Despite these headwinds, optimism remains high in some corners of the crypto industry. Community-driven “memecoins”, which often feature cartoon mascots like Dogecoin's Shiba Inu dog or the DeFi protocol Olympus DAO's cartoon Zeus character, delivered eye-popping returns of over 300 per cent in 2024, reflecting a shift in market dynamics and the growing influence and engagement of retail investors.

MicroStrategy, the business intelligence software firm led by vocal Bitcoin advocate Michael Saylor, also made headlines this week with the announcement of plans to raise an additional \$2 billion through a preferred stock offering to purchase more Bitcoin.

The company already holds over 145,000 Bitcoins, currently valued at around \$14 billion, which it began acquiring in 2020. MicroStrategy's “21/21 plan” aims to raise a total of \$42 billion over the next three years to invest in Bitcoin, highlighting the conviction of some institutional players even in volatile market conditions.

In regulatory news, there was a potential light at the end of the tunnel for users of FTX, the multi-billion dollar cryptocurrency exchange that collapsed in late 2022 amid

The company already holds over

145,000

Bitcoins, currently valued at around \$14 billion, which it began acquiring in 2020.

allegations of fraud and misuse of customer funds. A reorganisation plan approved by a US bankruptcy court took effect this week, paving the way for certain account holders to start receiving reimbursements. According to the plan, users claiming \$50,000 or less, which comprise approximately 98 per cent of all FTX accounts, could see repayment within 60 days. While far from a full recovery, it represents a step forward for impacted users, even as former FTX executives face ongoing criminal charges.

Meanwhile, on the technology front, the blockchain platform Solana took a major step towards “future-proofing” with the implementation of new cryptographic techniques aimed at securing the network against potential threats from quantum computers. Although still in the experimental stages, quantum computing has made impressive strides in recent years, with tech giants like Google and IBM claiming their latest prototypes can perform complex calculations orders of magnitude faster than the most advanced traditional supercomputers.

Some cryptography experts have warned that sufficiently powerful quantum computers could one day crack the encryption that secures most blockchains, including the elliptic curve digital signature algorithm (ECDSA) used by Bitcoin. This has prompted a race to develop and implement “post-quantum” cryptography that can withstand potential quantum attacks.

OMAN LAUNCHES BOLD MEASURES TO BOOST SMES

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 4

The Ministry of Finance has launched a robust package of initiatives aimed at strengthening Oman's private sector, empowering small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and advancing sustainable economic growth in line with Oman Vision 2040. As part of this ambitious strategy, RO 10 million from the 2024 development budget has been earmarked to support programmes designed to integrate job-seekers into the private sector. Additionally, 10 per cent of the value of procurement invoices from the oil and gas sectors will be allocated to initiatives that stimulate private enterprise, emphasising the vital role of the private sector in driving Oman's economic progress.

To further uplift SMEs, the Ministry has committed to reserving 17 per cent of all open government contracts for these enterprises while waiving registration fees for the Tender Board. These measures are expected to ease financial burdens on SMEs and enhance their ability to compete in an increasingly dynamic market.

In a move to prioritise local industries, the Ministry has implemented a mandatory procurement list to ensure public entities source goods and services from domestic manufacturers and suppliers. Complementing this effort, the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development has allocated RO 25 million in financing to foster innovation and growth among local entrepreneurs.

The Ministry of Finance's comprehensive plan is structured around the following objectives: Strengthening the economic contribution of SMEs; Creating meaningful employment opportunities for Omani nationals; Advancing innovation and enhancing local industrial capabilities; Reducing dependency on imports while boosting export potential; and diversifying Oman's economy to improve the trade balance.

To further promote entrepreneurship, the government has raised the financial ceiling for tenders allocated to SMEs, particularly those with the Entrepreneurship Card. This initiative aligns with a broader national effort to prioritise local content, reduce reliance on imports and improve the operational efficiency of the private sector.

These measures reinforce Oman's commitment to fostering a competitive and resilient economy by enhancing the capacity of SMEs and incentivising local production. The Ministry's forward-thinking initiatives underscore its dedication to economic resilience, inclusivity and innovation. By empowering SMEs and promoting local industries, Oman is laying the foundation for achieving Vision 2040's ambitious objectives. The Ministry of Finance is driving efforts to position Oman as a global leader in sustainable development, entrepreneurship and industrial growth.

A policy for equity and sustainable progress

THE INTRODUCTION of a personal income tax targeting high earners, as recently proposed by the Ministry of Finance, represents not only a pragmatic fiscal policy but also a moral imperative in the pursuit of equity. While taxation has historically been a sensitive subject, this proposal, which seeks to impose a modest 5 per cent levy on individuals earning over RO 30,000 annually after deductions, reflects a forward-thinking approach to addressing societal imbalances and ensuring sustainable national development. In a globalised era where economic disparities threaten societal cohesion, Oman's proposal serves as a bold statement of intent.

Taxation, in its essence, is the price we pay for a civilised society. By focusing on the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population, the proposed income tax is neither punitive nor excessive; it is a mechanism for recalibrating the scales of equity. High-income earners have long benefitted from the economic structures and opportunities afforded by the state, and it is only fair that they contribute proportionately to the development of public goods and services.

This policy represents an opportunity to channel additional resources into critical sectors such as healthcare, education and infrastructure — services that form the backbone of any equitable society. By targeting a narrow and affluent segment of the population, the government is ensuring that the tax will have no adverse impact on the middle or lower-income groups, who are often the most vulnerable in times of economic reform.

Moreover, this policy is not merely about revenue generation; it is about fostering a culture of financial accountability and transparency. By ensuring that all contributors — whether individuals or corporations — bear their fair share of the tax burden, Oman is signalling its commitment to a more balanced and robust economic framework.



The proposed tax reform is also a reminder that thoughtful, targeted policies can make a difference.



QASIM AL MAASHANI

The author is the head of Oman Observer's Business section

Such measures are vital not only for internal fiscal health, but also for enhancing the nation's reputation on the global stage as a transparent and reliable economic partner.

Critics often argue that new taxes can deter foreign investment, but this concern, while valid, appears to be overstated in this context. The proposed income tax is specifically targeted at distributed profits and high individual incomes, leaving reinvested corporate profits untouched. This nuanced approach demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the economic ecosystem, one that ensures growth and development are not stifled by fiscal reform.

Additionally, Oman's proactive measures to sign international agreements to avoid double taxation further underscore its commitment to maintaining an attractive investment climate. By balancing its domestic needs with its global economic positioning, Oman is crafting a policy that is as pragmatic as it is principled.

The Ministry of Finance's transparency in outlining the rationale behind the proposed tax, coupled with its decision to delay implementation until at least 2026, reflects a commendable commitment to due diligence. By taking the time to

conduct thorough studies and engage stakeholders, the government is ensuring that this policy will be both effective and equitable.

The income tax on high earners is more than a fiscal policy; it is a statement of values. It signals a commitment to fairness, a dedication to sustainability and a belief in shared responsibility. By asking more from those who have more, the government is not only addressing immediate economic needs, but also laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and cohesive society.

The proposed tax reform is also a reminder that thoughtful, targeted policies can make a difference. It is a step towards a future where prosperity is shared, where opportunities are equalised, and where the burdens of progress are borne by those most capable of shouldering them.

Ultimately, the success of this policy will depend on its careful implementation and the willingness of all stakeholders to embrace its underlying principles. But one thing is clear: this is a step in the right direction, and one that deserves not only our support but our admiration. For in the pursuit of justice and sustainability, there can be no higher calling.

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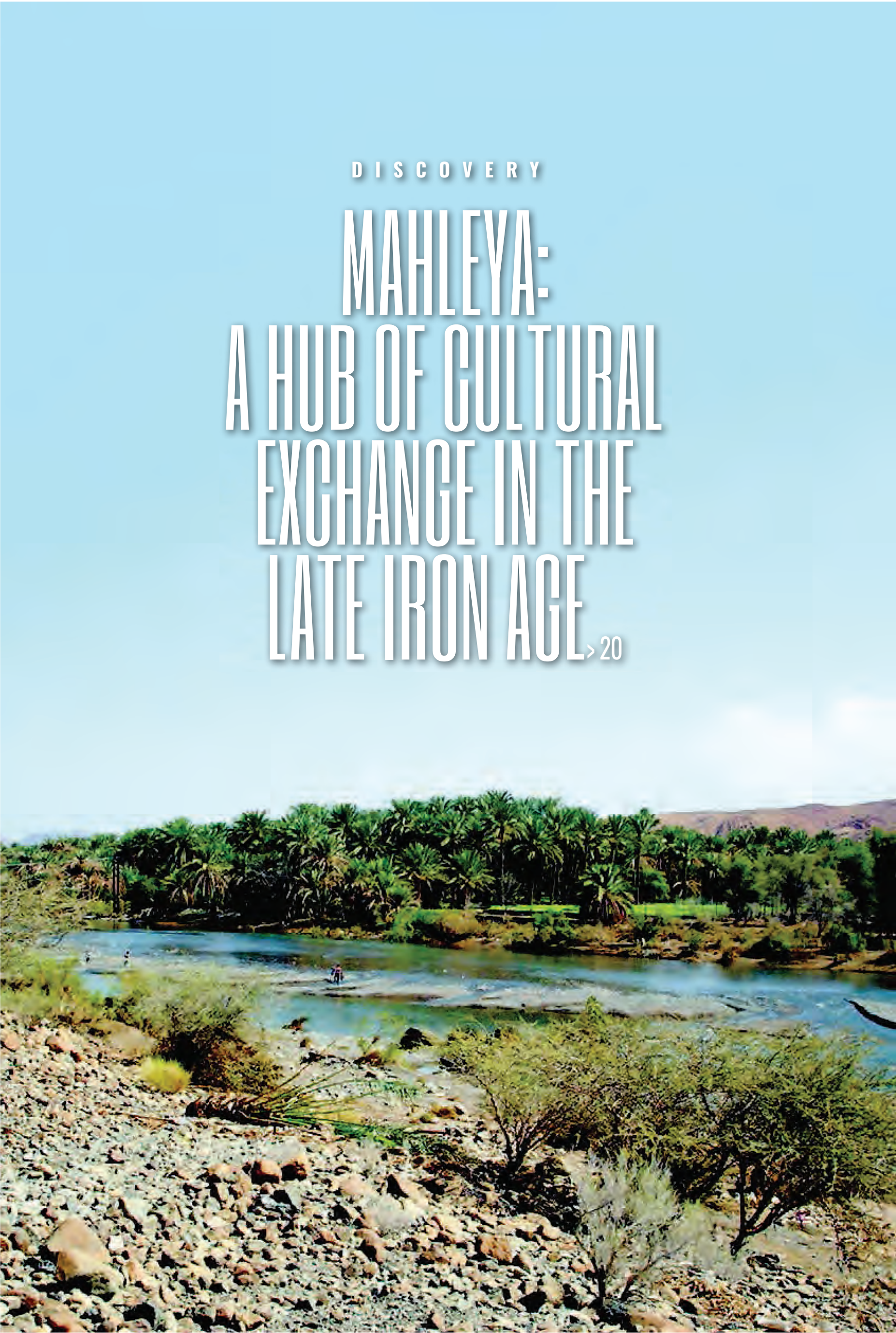
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ART/LIFE



DISCOVERY

MAHLEYA: A HUB OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN THE LATE IRON AGE^{>20}

ENTERTAINMENT

Sunday’s Golden Globes to launch Hollywood’s awards festivities



HOLLYWOOD will kick off its 2025 awards festivities at the annual Golden Globes ceremony where films such as “Wicked,” “The Brutalist” and “Emilia Perez” compete for trophies and attention ahead of the Oscars.

Timothee Chalamet, Selena Gomez, Ariana Grande and Angelina Jolie are among the stars in the running for acting honours at the red-carpet ceremony that will be hosted for the first time by comedian Nikki Glaser. The show will be broadcast live on CBS and stream on Paramount+.

Spanish-language musical “Emilia Perez” and post-World War Two epic “The Brutalist” lead the night’s movie nominees.

“The Brutalist” stars Adrien Brody as a Holocaust survivor who flees to the United States to chase the American dream. The 3-1/2 hour tale is considered a frontrunner for the night’s top prize, best film drama.

Competitors include “Conclave,” about the selection of a pope, and two movies starring Chalamet - Bob Dylan biopic “A Complete Unknown” and sci-fi epic “Dune - Part II.” Unlike the Oscars, musical and comedy films compete in a separate category at the Globes. Nominees in that field include box office smash “Wicked” and dark romantic comedy “Anora”.

Winning a Globe can help films in the run-up to the Academy Awards in March. If a movie or actor takes home a Globe, “it increases the likelihood a member of the film academy will check out that project,” said Scott Feinberg, executive editor for awards at The Hollywood Reporter. Feinberg predicted “The Brutalist” or “Conclave” would earn the drama prize at the Globes. The musical or comedy category is harder to gauge, he said, because the nominees are so different from one another.

“Emilia Perez”, a musical thriller, tells the story of a Mexican drug lord. “Wicked,” a prequel to “The Wizard of Oz,” was adapted from a popular Broadway stage show.

“Anora”, about a worker who marries the son of a Russian oligarch, is more of a traditional comedy while “The Substance” starring Demi Moore as a fading celebrity seeking a fountain of youth, is essentially a horror movie, Feinberg said.

Winners of the Globes are chosen by 334 entertainment journalists from 85 countries, compared with roughly 9,000 voters who select the Academy Awards. — Reuters

QUICK FEATURES



FESTIVAL

A Sadhu or Hindu holy man blows a religious instrument at an Atal Akhara camp, ahead of the Maha Kumbh Mela festival in Prayagraj. — AFP



EVENTS

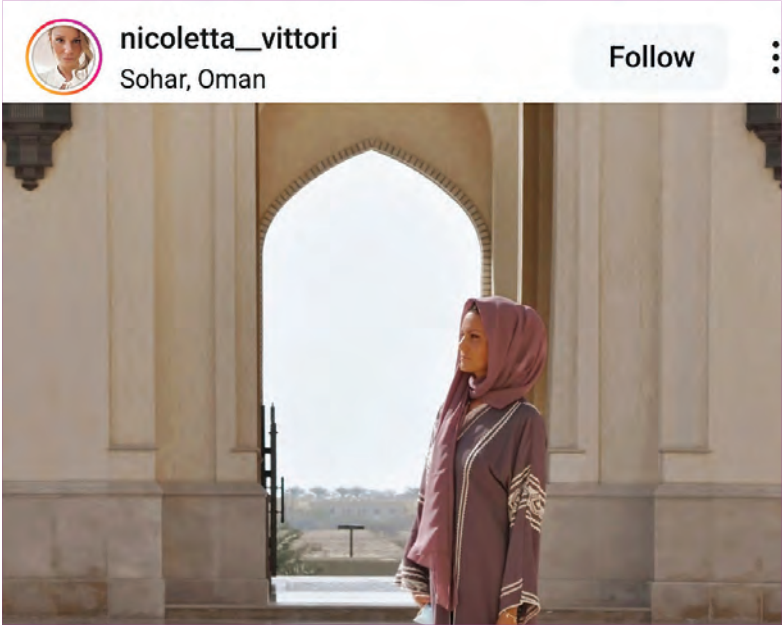
Japanese architect and Expo Site Design Producer Sou Fujimoto poses for a photograph at the Grand Ring on the site of Expo 2025 in Osaka. — AFP



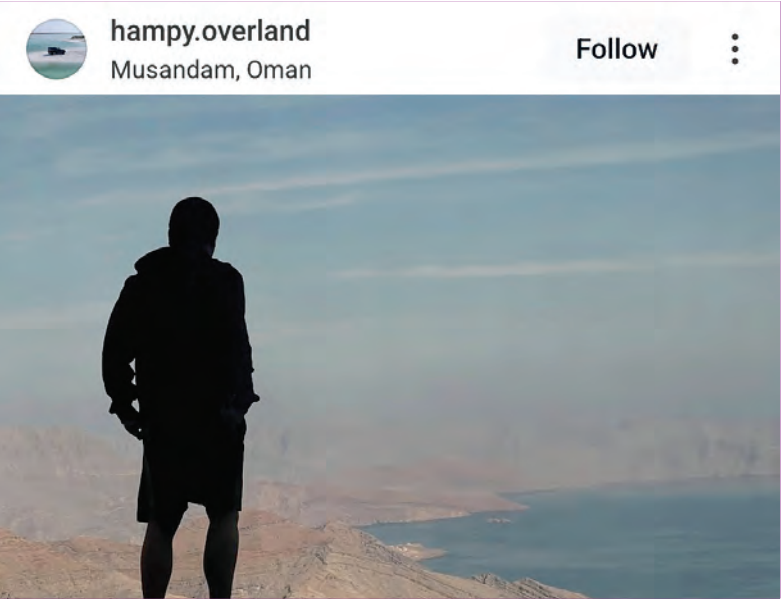
LIFESTYLE

An Aymara Indigenous man poses for a picture during the “Roscasiri” in the Pomata District, one of seven districts of the Chucuito Province in the Puno Region, southern Peru. — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Appreciating Local Architecture

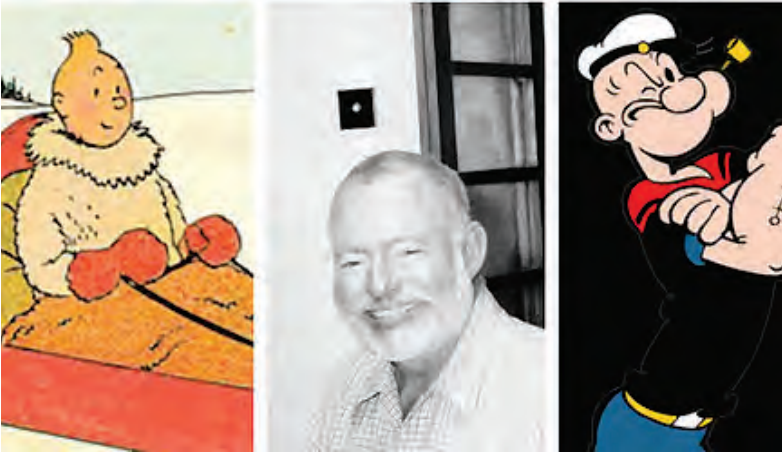


Beauty of Remote Places

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Tintin, Popeye, Hemingway among US copyrights expiring in 2025



FROM “A Farewell to Arms” to the cartoon character Popeye the Sailor, thousands of artistic works will enter the public domain in the United States on Wednesday.

US copyright law expires after 95 years for books, films and other works of art, while sound recordings from 1924 will also be copyright-free.

By entering the public domain, the pieces can be copied, shared, reproduced or adapted by anyone without paying the rights owner.

This year’s crop includes internationally recognised figures such as the comic character Tintin, who made his debut in a Belgian newspaper in 1929, and Popeye the Sailor, created by cartoonist Elzie Crisler Segar.

Every December, the Centre for the Study of the Public Domain publishes a list of the cultural works that lose their copyright in the new year.

The centre, part of the Duke University School of Law in

the southeastern US state of North Carolina, makes the list available on its website for anyone to peruse.

“In past years we have celebrated an exciting cast of public domain characters: the original Mickey Mouse and Winnie-the-Pooh, and the final iterations of Sherlock Holmes from Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories,” centre director Jennifer Jenkins wrote on its website.

“In 2025 copyright expires over more aspects of Mickey from his 1929 incarnations, along with the initial versions of Popeye and Tintin.”

Among the literary works entering the US public domain on January 1 are the novels “The Sound and the Fury” by William Faulkner, “A Farewell to Arms” by Ernest Hemingway, “A Room of One’s Own” by Virginia Woolf and the first English translation of “All Quiet on the Western Front” by the German author Erich Maria Remarque. — AFP



Blooming hard: Taiwan’s persimmon growers struggle

TAIWANESE persimmon farmer Lo Chih-neng stands on a ladder in his sprawling orchard using secateurs to cut the golden-yellow fruit still hanging from branches after enduring a tough season.

Persimmons are popular in Taiwan where people travel hours to buy bags and boxes of the sweet dried fruit to take home to their families or give away to friends.

But changing weather and an ageing population are posing a threat to the century-old industry, forcing some farmers to look at alternative ways to maximise returns — or get out altogether.

Lo’s harvest was down by more than a third in 2024, Taiwan’s hottest year on record, after some of his trees failed to bloom and two typhoons in October stripped many of their leaves and fruit.

“The yield has dropped by quite a lot, at least a third or more,” Lo, 65, said, sitting in his farm where persimmon trees carpet a valley in Dongshi district, in the central west of the island.

“The losses have been severe, and it’s mostly due to the typhoons,” said Lo, who expects to lose Nt\$1 million (\$30,000) from his takings on this year’s crop.

Taiwan’s Central Weather Administration said on Tuesday that 2024 was the hottest year since records began 127 years ago, echoing unprecedented temperature highs felt around the world.

- CLIMATE HARDSHIP -

Taiwan’s annual persimmon harvest declined for the second year in a row in 2023 to around 59,000 tonnes.

It is expected to be more than 13 per cent lower in 2024, figures from the Agriculture and Food Agency show.

The land area used for growing the fruit has shrunk to 4,700 hectares (11,600 acres) from more than 5,300 hectares a decade ago, and the number of persimmon farmers has also fallen, Su Tang-chao, director of the agency’s fruit and flower division, said.

“In recent years, we have observed changes in production areas and fluctuations in yield and quality due to broader environmental changes,



such as climate change and global warming,” Su said.

Fresh persimmons are harvested from September to December, with most of the fruit sent to Hsinchu county, south of Taipei, to be dried.

Nearly all of the fruit harvested every year is consumed in Taiwan.

Lo’s harvest is put into plastic crates, loaded into the back of a truck and taken to Weiweijia persimmon orchard where Lu Li-chien’s family has been growing and drying the fruit for more than a century.

Tourists flock to Lu’s farm to pose for photos among outdoor circular racks of fruit that shrivel and darken as they dry in the sun and wind — a traditional method used by Taiwan’s ethnic Hakka community.

Normally, fresh persimmons arrive at the Weiweijia farm every day, but Lu said this year’s harvest has been “extremely low” and deliveries have been every two days.

“Compared to previous years, we only have about 20 per cent of the usual supply,” Lu, 68, said.

“When I ask the farmers about the cause, they said the trees are not blooming properly, the flowers aren’t opening up as they should.”

Lu blames “climate abnormalities”, with the production problems worsened by ageing growers whose children have no interest in taking over the family orchard.

“We’ve never encountered such



a situation,” he said of the poor harvest.

To maximise earnings, Lu’s workers collect persimmon peels and turn them into dye. There are also plans afoot to make skincare products.

Lo, who has a teenage daughter, said he hopes to pass his farm to his nephew in the next few years — if he is up to the challenge.

“I told him, ‘If you’re afraid of hardship, you won’t be able to do this,’” Lo said. “It gets really hot sometimes, and other times, it’s very cold.” — AFP

FEATURES

BY YERU EBUEN

PICTURE

THIS: ancient communities thriving amidst a fertile landscape, where the integration of coastal resources and inland agriculture fostered economic growth and socio-political structures.

If you love archaeology, then Mahleya should be on your list of places to visit, as recent discoveries suggest that it has been a hub of cultural exchange and settlement during the Late Iron Age (300 BC – 200 AD).

In a paper by Prof Nasser bin Said al Jahwari from the Department of Archaeology at Sultan Qaboos University, he outlined that the Late Iron Age/Samad Period settlement was situated on the western bank of Wadi Mahram, close to the village of Mahleya. He explained that the site was discovered and excavated in January 2004, which proved very rewarding.

The Mahleya settlement itself spans an impressive 28.5 hectares and showcases remarkable architectural designs — from robust dwellings and intricate workshops to fortified structures. Excavations have uncovered two main rectangular structures that provide insights into the living conditions and social dynamics of their inhabitants. One features a hearth, suggesting that it served as a communal living space where families gathered, while the purpose of the other space remains shrouded in mystery, teasing potential differences in function and usage.

Artefacts recovered from the site — over 1,500 pottery sherds, fragments of chlorite vessels and numerous marine shells — elucidate the cultural connections that transcended the arid landscape. The presence of date stones indicates an agricultural economy centred on date palm cultivation, which remains a staple in Omani society today.

The relevance of the Mahleya discoveries resonates beyond academia; they speak to contemporary issues of sustainability, resource management and cultural identity.

AGRICULTURAL INGENUITY, TRADE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Amidst the rugged terrain, archaeologists have uncovered two well-defined rectangular structures, known as S1 and S2. S1, with its central hearth, paints a vivid picture of domestic life, suggesting it was a lively space where families gathered, shared stories and cooked. These structures highlight the advanced building techniques of the time, representing not just houses, but communal hubs that fostered social bonds among the inhabitants.

An abundance of burned date stones reveals that the date palm, a hallmark of Omani agriculture, was both a staple and a cultural icon for the residents of Mahleya. This discovery signifies more than mere subsistence; it reflects a deep-seated reliance on agriculture, interwoven with the rhythms of life in this arid landscape. The presence of cleared agricultural plots suggests the ingenuity of ancient Omani farmers who moulded their environment to cultivate these vital trees.

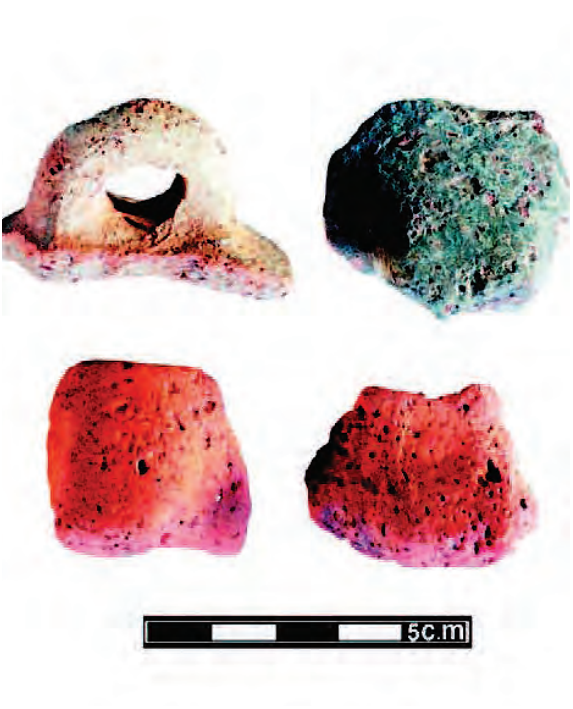
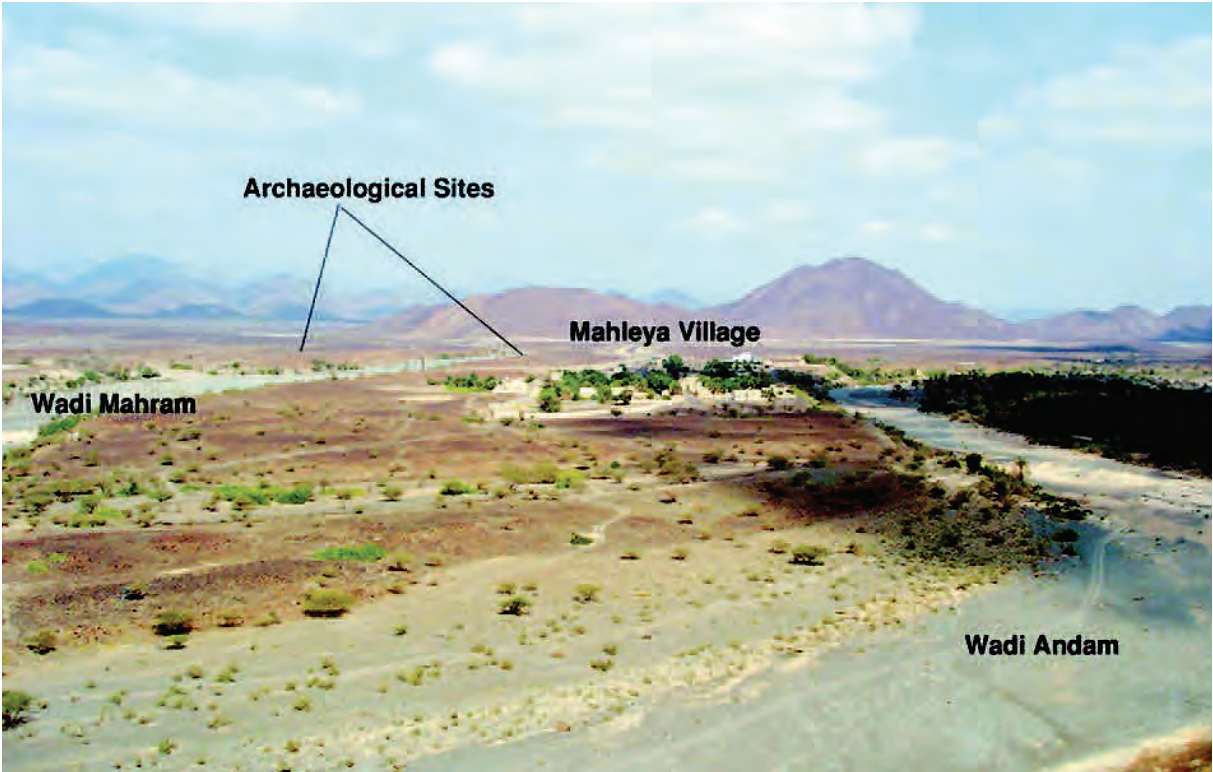
Venturing into the site, one can almost imagine the ancient engineers who devised the aflaj irrigation system to coax life from the arid land. This sophisticated technique for channelling water from underground sources demonstrates a profound understanding of hydrology and agriculture. It stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Mahleya community, providing water to sustain crops and support the settlement’s flourishing economy.

Over 1,500 pottery sherds excavated from the site reveal the artistic flair and daily habits of the Mahleya inhabitants. Each piece, with its unique design and material, narrates a story of local craftsmanship and trade. From functional storage jars to intricately decorated vessels, these artefacts embody the spirit of innovation and creativity, showing how the people of Mahleya not only survived but thrived in their environment.

Among the artefacts, marine shells provide a tantalising glimpse into the



MAHLEYA:
A HUB OF CULTURAL
EXCHANGE IN THE
LATE IRON AGE



trade networks that once connected the inland settlement to bustling coastal communities. These shells are more than relics; they signify the exchange of goods, suggesting that the Mahleya residents traded agricultural products for seafood, bridging both culinary delights and economic prosperity. This connection highlights the vibrant cultural interactions of ancient Oman, where land and sea met in a thriving marketplace.

A LIVING CONNECTION TO ANCIENT HISTORY

Today, as the sun rises over the Mahleya settlement, it reflects off the remnants of history, inviting modern explorers to walk in the footsteps of those who came long before. The landscape, dotted with archaeological finds, is a vivid reminder of how past lives still echo today, offering insights into sustainable practices and social structures that continue to resonate in contemporary Omani culture.

As scientists and historians continue to unearth the layers of Mahleya, they not only reveal the intricate ways of life from centuries ago, but also emphasise the importance of preserving such sites for future generations. The discoveries at Mahleya contribute significantly to our understanding of the region’s history and the resilience of its inhabitants, reminding us that the threads of human existence connect us across time and space.

In the spirit of exploration and education, the tale of Mahleya reminds us that history is not simply about the past; it is a living narrative that enriches our present and shapes our future.